OC

REMEMBERING LATA MANGESHKAR

CINEMA: SOUTHERN RESURGENCE

RAHUL'S CONGRESS: AN EMPTY BENCH

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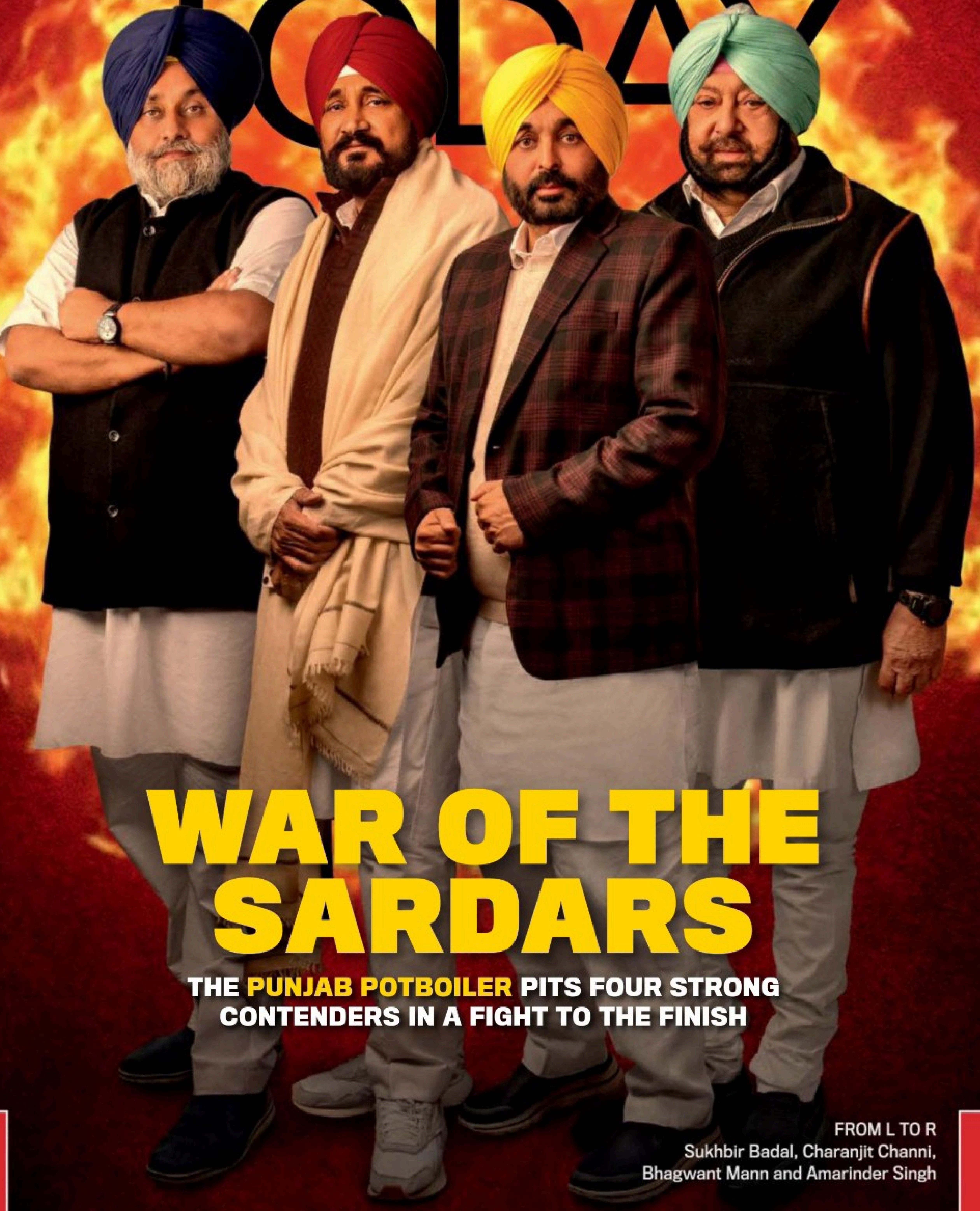

WAR OF THE SARDARS

THE PUNJAB POTBOILER PITS FOUR STRONG CONTENDERS IN A FIGHT TO THE FINISH

FROM L TO R
Sukhbir Badal, Charanjit Channi,
Bhagwant Mann and Amarinder Singh

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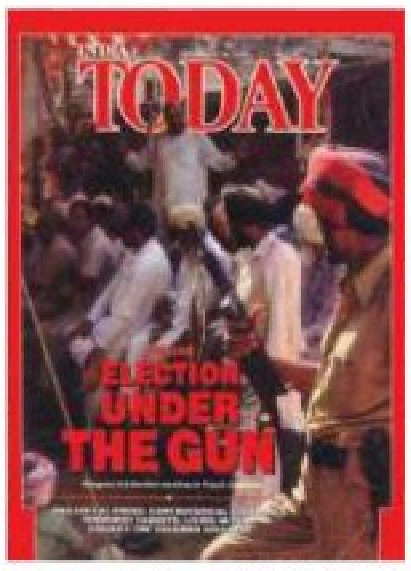
FROM THE
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Anyone who believes state elections are dull and predictable should look closely at Punjab's upcoming polls. In the fray are a 79-year-old titular maharaja, a former standup comedian, a 94-year-old former chief minister who won his first election 65 years ago, and a dark horse who outmanoeuvred a cricketer-turned-TV host-turned politician to become the CM candidate. They represent the four sides of the state's first multi-cornered contest in recent years.

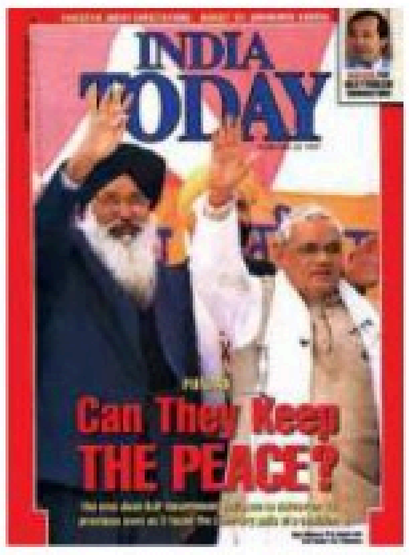
With 117 assembly constituencies, Punjab has fewer seats than eastern Uttar Pradesh. Yet the stakes here are among the highest in the five states going to elections this month. There are several reasons. Punjab is a frontier state that shares a 553-kilometre boundary with Pakistan. Memories of a Pakistan-supported militancy that lasted over a decade, from the 1980s to the 1990s, are still fresh. Of late, there have been persistent attempts by Pakistan's deep state to revive militancy, some of which have included sending drones packed with weapons and explosives.

Punjab was more recently the epicentre of an unprecedented 12-month-long farmers' agitation that began two months after the central government brought in three farm laws in September 2020. The stir ended a year later in November 2021 when the government withdrew the laws.

In another political drama late last year, Punjab CM Amarinder Singh was replaced by a relatively unknown Congressman, Charanjit Singh Channi. Differences over the farm laws saw the Shiromani Akali Dal part ways with its alliance partner of 23 years, the BJP, in 2020. The Akalis, besides relying on their traditional Jat Sikh vote bank, have teamed up with the BSP in the hope of getting a share of the Dalit vote. Amarinder Singh, meanwhile, has broken away from the Congress to float his own Punjab Lok Congress. The BJP, eager for a Sikh face after SAD's exit, has partnered with him. The Aam Aadmi Party, which made its debut in the state in 2017, has projected a former standup comic, Bhagwant Mann, as its CM candidate. Even the 22 farm unions who got the government to roll back the farm laws have floated their own party to contest the election. This bewildering array of formations and multi-cornered contests means that the possibility of a hung assembly this time around is very real. And that's what makes this election so contentious.



September 30, 1985



February 28, 1997

Punjab has three major regions—Malwa, Doaba and Majha. AAP has a base in the largest, Malwa, but needs seats from the Doaba and Majha regions to cross the 59-seat halfway mark. The Congress faces anti-incumbency, though Channi's candidature as CM gives them a fighting chance. Being a Dalit, Channi is relying on cornering a large share of the 32 per cent Dalit vote. They are, however, divided too. The SAD under Sukhbir Badal might have lost the last election but has managed to retain its vote bank. Badal is counting on promises of development to see his party through this election. His father, the nonagenarian Parkash Singh Badal, is fighting his 13th assembly election, because every seat counts. Issues like the rampant drug addiction among the state's youth and the 2015 desecration of the Guru Granth Sahib continue to be emotive. The BJP-Amarinder Singh alliance hopes to consolidate Hindu and moderate Sikh voters. The party is also building up its base among the Mazhabi Sikh community.

Any one of three scenarios could unfold when results are declared on March 10. The first—a hung assembly with none of the four formations getting a clear majority. The second—a decisive vote in favour of one of the opposition formations, and the third—a return of the ruling Congress.

Whoever wins will have the unenviable task of fixing an underperforming state. Punjab was once one of India's most prosperous states. Today, its finances are in a mess. The state's debt is now 43.7 per cent of GSDP (it was more than half the previous fiscal on account of the lower GSDP), and repayment is expected to take up 29 per cent of the state budget. The state's expected expenditure of Rs 1.68 lakh crore this year is nearly double its projected revenue of Rs 95,263 crore. The per capita income of Rs 1.15 lakh is lower than the national average of Rs 1.16 lakh. The state spends just Rs 869 per person on capital expenditure against a national average of Rs 3,509, and Rs 6,981 on social sector expenditure against a national average of Rs 8,962. Agriculture is stagnant, unable to break out of the two-crop cycle of wheat and paddy.

More than half the state's young people, born after the 1990s, have no memory of militancy. The real worry for them today is the lack of jobs. Industries that deserted the state during militancy have not returned. Because of this, thousands of the state's youth have been migrating to the West in search of better opportunities.

Group Editorial Director (Publishing) Raj Chengappa, Group Photo Editor Bandeep Singh and Senior Editor Anilesh S. Mahajan recently travelled to Punjab. It is a state, we discovered, all three were born in. They interviewed and photographed all four leaders of Punjab's major parties on the campaign trail to put together our cover story, 'The Battle of the Sardars'. They got a sense of what these leaders are promising the electorate and why this battle is crucial for the state. Given the plot twists and turns and the bewildering star cast, this is one potboiler no one really knows the outcome of. The trouble will begin if there is a hung assembly. Who will ally with whom to form a government, if at all? They all hate each other. But, then, anything is possible in Indian politics.

(Aroon Purie)

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(from top, left) Capt. Amarinder Singh; Charanjit Singh Channi; Bhagwant Singh Mann and Sukhbir Singh Badal

Photo imaging by NILANJAN DAS

COVER STORY

WAR OF THE SARDARS

Four strong contenders are engaged in a fight to the finish in the potboiler that is the Punjab assembly election

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ABHISHEK: OUT OF MAMATA'S SHADOW PG 8

ANDHRA PRADESH: DIVIDE AND RULE PG 10

DAILY CHECKS A health worker attends to a patient at a Covid facility in Delhi

ANI

COVID-19/ OMICRON

COVID'S LONG SHADOW

By Sonali Acharjee

For Natasha Sharma, homemaker and mother to four-year-old twins, 2022 began inauspiciously. The 34-year-old Pune resident tested positive for the Omicron variant of Covid-19 in the first week of January. For two days, Sharma had a consistently high fever and a sore throat. Following her doctor's advice, she treated her symptoms with paracetamol and multivitamins. By day three, her fever had gone and her throat began to improve. But over the next 10 days, Sharma continued to experience weakness, aches in her leg muscles, insomnia and tiredness. Her doctor diagnosed her with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, a complex, multisystem disorder, also known as chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS).

"It felt like there was no strength in my fingers. Just getting myself up and off the bed was a task. It was hard to look after my children or even myself," says Sharma, a regular jogger and practitioner of yoga. Around two weeks after her Covid symptoms had eased, Sharma says she was finally able to take a flight of stairs without feeling winded.

THE WEARYING VIRUS

While fatigue has been a common symptom of Covid, Omicron has seen a rise in instances of CFS even among mild cases. The ZOE Symptom Tracking Study showed that between December 3 and 10, the most common signs of Omicron were a runny nose, headache, fatigue, sneezing and a sore throat. Similarly, the US health agency Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports fatigue as one of the four most common symptoms of the new variant. Early reports from South Africa also indicated that

IS THE THIRD WAVE OVER?

After two months, the Omicron wave in India seems to have receded. From an R-value of 4 in the first week of 2022, the highest ever recorded during the pandemic, to the current 1.3, critical parameters are pointing to a reduction in both the number of cases and the pace of spread of infection. In all metros, the R-value, a measure of how many people a single positive patient can infect, was less than 1, including Kolkata, Mumbai, Delhi and Chennai. India reported 83,876 new Covid cases on February 8, while the positivity rate dropped to 7.25 per cent. It is still above the WHO-recommended 5 per cent, but significantly lower than the 16.2 per cent reported in the first week of January 2022. This is also the first time since January 6 that India's daily Covid tally did not go above 100,000. The decline in Covid cases has prompted many states to reopen schools, malls, gyms and offices and increase the permitted size of public gatherings.

A similar trend with Omicron has been reported across the world with the WHO noting that in most countries, the wave, having peaked already, is currently in decline. However, the global health body continues to warn against complacency, so as to not allow more Covid variants to come up. Vaccines in particular are critical to ending the pandemic—the sooner the world is fully vaccinated against the current dominant strains, the lesser the chances of new strains arising. In India, while vaccinations for children under the age of 15 are still on hold as the DCGI awaits more safety data, the country has approved nine vaccines for use and already vaccinated over 70 per cent of the adult population. Experts say this is one of the reasons why the Omicron wave was shorter and the symptoms were significantly less severe than the Delta wave. The the highest single day death in the Omicron wave was 1,733, against 4,300 for Delta. As India continues to open up, vaccinating the entire population remains key to ensure any future fourth wave will end quickly and cause even less damage.

many mild cases of Omicron resulted in severe fatigue even after other symptoms receded. "Different people have different severity of Covid-19. What we are seeing is that regardless of severity, some patients are reporting weakness post recovery," says Dr Chandrashekhar T., director, critical care, Fortis Hiranandani Hospital, Mumbai.

CFS, though, is not surprising post-Covid as the body expends significant energy and resources in defending the cells from the viral infection. Doctors say such fatigue is common during the recovery period of many illnesses—malaria, typhoid, dengue and influenza, among others. "The body needs time to recover and in the initial days after symptoms subside, there will be some signs of weakness," says Dr Vivek Nangia, pulmonologist at Max Super Speciality Hospital, Saket, New Delhi.

How long the weakness lasts is subject to how severe a disease the person had. A January 2022 study in Norway looked at 66 Omicron-positive patients and found that, on an average, their fatigue lasted for seven to 14 days from the start of their Covid symptoms.

NUTRITION IS KEY

"How fast patients recover is also dependent on the nutritional intake of the patient during and after the disease," says Dr Chandrashekhar. "Eating a diet rich in minerals and vitamins is, along with adequate rest, essential for the body to recover and heal from any illness," adds Dr Vaishali Verma, nutritionist, Manipal Hospital, Delhi.

A 2021 PubMed study found that certain foods—eggs, seafood, fruits, meat, milk, starchy roots, stimulants, nuts, vegetable oil and vegetables—had a positive impact on Covid recovery. In general, consumption of higher levels of proteins and lipids have been shown to have a positive effect on recovery from the virus. "I ate a lot of pro- and prebiotic foods during my recovery and it helped restore my energy and balance out the impact of the virus on my digestion. Yoghurt, buttermilk, *kaanji* and kombucha were my go-to choices," says Kuldeep Singh, a 39-year-old Omicron survivor from Delhi. As per Delhi-based clinical nutritionist Dr Megha Jaina, a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables can help replenish energy levels more effectively than chemical vitamin supplements as the body absorbs nutrients from natural sources much better. "Balance and variety make a post-Covid diet healthy. If there are digestive symptoms, like acidity, bloating or constipation, then consult a nutritionist to restore healthy gut bacteria," she says.

MENTAL WELLBEING

In addition to proper nutrition, it is also important that patients reduce their mental stress. "There is widespread anxiety and panic regarding the virus because of social media," says Dr Chandrashekhar. "Many messages online are true, but many are false and lead to rumour-mongering, which, in turn, increases mental stress in many patients. The best recommendation is to consult a doctor. One's treatment during and after Covid has to be devised keeping in mind the patient's condition and health parameters."

> **WHILE FATIGUE HAS BEEN A COMMON SYMPTOM OF COVID, OMICRON HAS SEEN A RISE IN INSTANCES OF FATIGUE EVEN AMONG MILD CASES**

Mumbai-based psychiatrist Dr Kedar Tilwe adds that mental stress can have a debilitating impact on physical energy and hamper the body's natural recovery process from the disease. "Anxiety, poor sleep and stress will add to physical fatigue," he says.

Low energy and weakness can be difficult to handle and understand. Many doctors say that patients feel stressed when they aren't able to resume everyday activities immediately. But, as experts say, rest, nutrition and mental relaxation go hand in hand when coping with this lingering symptom of Covid. ■

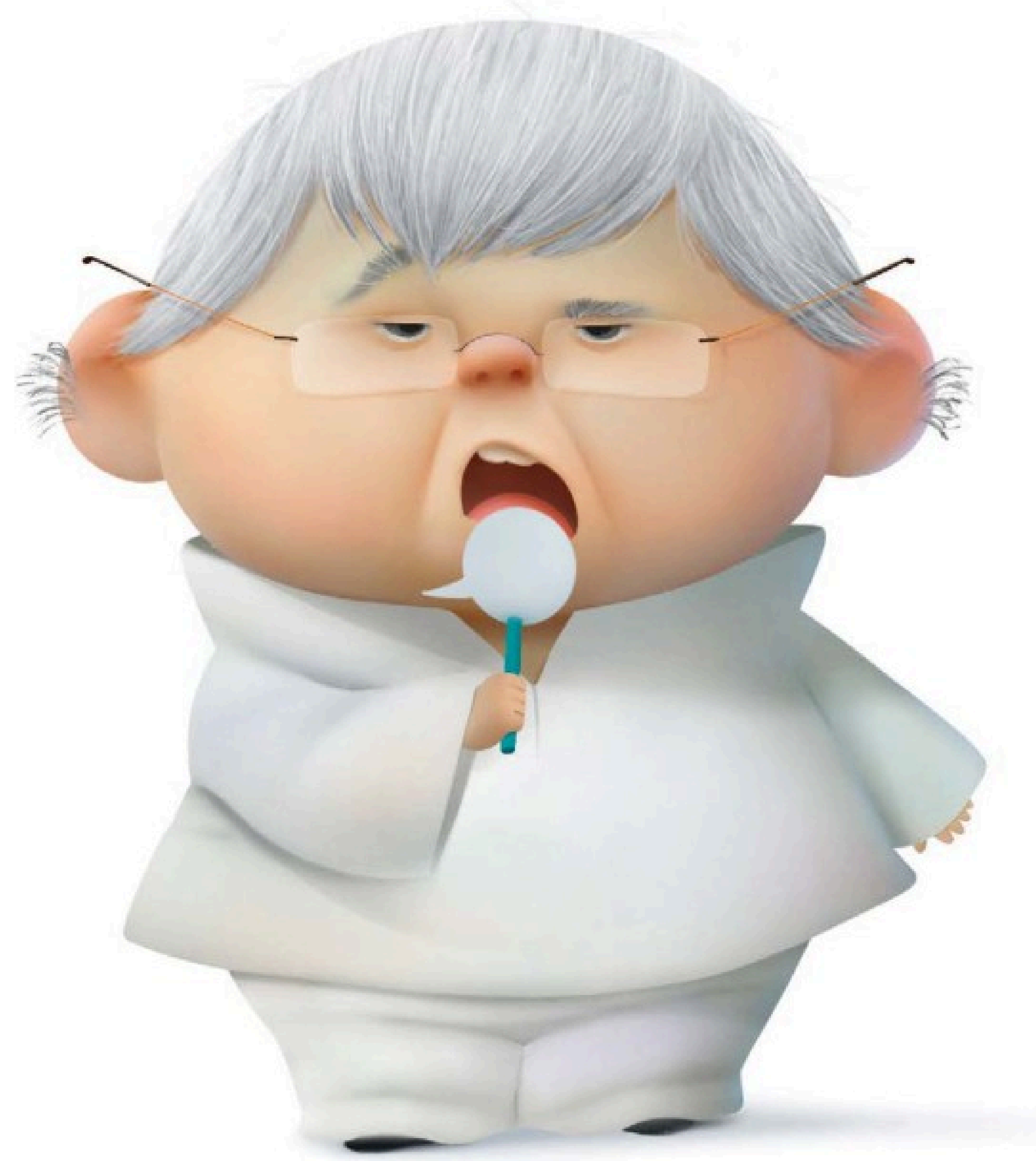


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

GLASSHOUSE

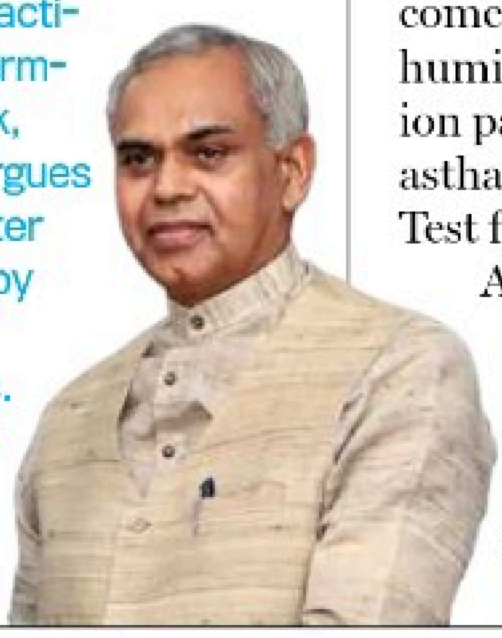
MAN OF FEW WORDS

Former Bihar CM Lalu Prasad Yadav's speeches, laced with sarcasm and rustic wit, once held thousands in their thrall. But in recent years, age, ill health and a prison spell for his role in the fodder scam have made the RJD national president a reticent presence. But his words still carry a lot of weight. Last October, Lalu called Bihar Congress in-charge Bhakt Charan Das "*bhakchonhar* (devoid of common sense)". The two parties soon fell apart and contested the bypolls separately. With a verdict in the fodder scam likely this month, the buzz was he might make way for son Tejashwi. Apparently not—when a reporter asked about the widely expected change in guard, Lalu silenced him with one word: "*Moorkh* (fool)!". That's settled then.

Sharks and Elephants

The memoirs of bureaucrat and gold smuggling case accused, M. Sivasankar, have triggered a political storm in Kerala. In *Ashwatthama Is Just an Elephant*, the former principal secretary to CM **Pinarayi Vijayan** claims he was 'framed' by the other accused, including alleged paramour Swapna Suresh. The Opposition has now demanded that the case be reopened. The ruling CPI(M) believes the memoirs were written at the behest of the BJP. They point to another Pinarayi favourite, former vigilance director Jacob Thomas, whose tell-all account, *Swimming with Sharks*, had also skewered the government. The Marxists are now wary of any animal-titled memoirs.

NATURAL CLAIMANT



Gujarat governor **Acharya Devvrat** is said to be the inspiration behind Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman's organic farming push in the budget. An avid practitioner of natural farming, Devvrat's book, *Prakrutik Krishi*, argues that the use of water can be minimised by 70 per cent if we eschew chemicals. Is the governor up for another role at the Centre?

FUNEREAL AIR

Mumbai Congress president **Ashok 'Bhai' Jagtap** was the party's sole representative at Lata Mangeshkar's state funeral on February 6. With social media agog over the 'insult', the party went into damage-control mode, saying its leaders were unwell or out of the city. State Congress president Nana Patole also made a well-publicised visit to the grieving Mangeshkar family the very next day.

Charity Begins at Home

Last year in March, then Rajasthan minister for school education **Govind Singh Dotasra** snubbed teachers who had come seeking his help, asking if they thought the government was a "*nathi ka bada* (charity)". The comeuppance has come now with Dotasra humiliated by the question paper leaks in the Rajasthan Eligibility Entrance Test for Teachers exam.

Adding insult to injury, miscreants (allegedly from the opposition BJP) painted a 'Nathi ka Bada' sign outside Dotasra's home.

–Sandeep Unnithan with Amitabh Srivastava, Jeemon Jacob, Kiran D. Tare and Rohit Parihar

HIS OWN MAN Abhishek Banerjee at a TMC rally in South Dinajpur district

PTI

WEST BENGAL/ TMC

BATTLE LINES DRAWN IN TMC

By Romita Datta

A fortnight after the 'generational feud' in the Trinamool Congress erupted on social media, party chairperson Mamata Banerjee finally broke her silence at the hastily organised organisational polls on February 2. After being re-elected to the post (obviously without contest), the first thing she did was to assert her supremacy. "A leader does not fall from the heavens. He/she becomes one through work," she said amid deafening silence. The gibe, many say, was directed at nephew and party No. 2 Abhishek, seated next to her, and the young brigade, who had been going ga-ga on social media over his 'leadership qualities', especially the way he enforced Covid protocols in his Lok Sabha constituency, Diamond Harbour, when the Gangasagar Mela was on.

On January 8, Abhishek had come out and made comments against the mela, which Mamata, also the West Bengal chief minister, had been hyping as a "people's event" despite the surge in Omicron numbers in the state. Abhishek made a pointed jibe, saying such mass celebrations of religious festivals when Covid was raging had to stop to "save the state and society". As if to prove a point, he also rolled out a massive Covid testing drive in his constituency and ensured strict protocols for Mela visitors. The party's Lok Sabha chief whip and senior leader Kalyan Banerjee had questioned Abhishek's audacity in making such public comments then, which set off the sniping war between supporters of the old guard and those of Abhishek.

A GROWING RIFT

The situation has been simmering for some time, so much so a joke doing the rounds is are you Trinamool Kalighat or Trinamool Camac Street? (The reference is to Mamata's home in Kalighat and Abhishek's office in Camac Street.) In matters of candidate selection, the two have seldom been on the same page the last year, be it for the 2021 assembly election or the recent Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) polls. The differences came out in public when Mamata rejected poll strategist Abhishek and Prashant Kishor (PK)'s candidate list of the civic polls. PK had fashioned last year's famous assembly poll victory and is now part of the TMC think-tank. Sources say, for the first time in Trinamool's history, there were heated arguments over the choice of candidates between Mamata and her nephew.

The same issues flared up on February 4 when the party's IT cell uploaded a list of candidates for the polls in 108 municipalities on the TMC website. Soon, the leadership was compelled to publicly dismiss it as a fake list. "This list did not have the signature of senior leaders Partha Chatterjee and Subrata Bakshi, who were assigned by Didi to prepare it," reveals a party MLA on condition of anonymity. "We suspect that PK's team, which looks after the party's IT cell, was behind it. This was PK's wish list, which the leadership turned down." PK and Abhishek are said to be in agreement about a revamp of the

THRUST & PARRY

- Draft proposal to make Abhishek TMC national working president dropped for now on Mamata's orders
- Mamata removes security cover for a dozen Abhishek loyalists; one of his loyalists from Alipurduar arrested
- Abhishek announces stern action against party hooligans who use force to rig polls, a first for the TMC
- He introduces one-person-one-post formula in TMC, going against Mamata's line of awarding loyalists with multiple posts
- Wants to give the TMC young brigade more powers, but the old guard is Mamata's comfort zone. Tussle on same lines in state bureaucracy

TMC, so no one is even asking who helped PK prepare the list. "About 30 per cent of PK's recommendations were scrapped, but the leadership accepted the rest as Abhishek's recommendations," says a source, who also added that PK may be on his way out.

"Initially, there was a vertical split—the old-timers versus the younger lot. Now, the split is beyond age and demography, it's a power game between the two top players," says social scientist and professor emeritus at Presidency University, Prasanta Ray. On February 8, TMC secretary-general Partha Chatterjee took a dig at the nephew, commenting that "Mamata has no family", that the state's people are her family,

PULLING STRINGS

Though Abhishek has kept away from the state administrative headquarters Nabanna, the buzz is he has eyes and ears there. The junior bureaucrats are reportedly close to him, but the senior lot are with Didi. Sources also say the IPS lobby is under his control and that he has a say in transfers and postings. Recently, differences between the two power centres cropped up over the selection of the Kolkata police commissioner. Mamata got Vineet Goyal even though Abhishek was partial to Gyanwant Singh. Now, after the Diamond Harbour fracas, Mamata is reportedly planning a reshuffle of IPS officers to get her men in place.

According to one minister, even the appointments of their personal assistants (PAs) was happening via Abhishek's office. The lateral entry appointments of professionals as special secretaries in 30 departments has raised the same fears. A similar arrangement is being planned for the districts to oversee the performance of district magistrates. Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar has flagged the issue. The buzz is that Abhishek has a team, allegedly sourced from Kishor's I-PAC, to keep track of activities, especially the fund management of various departments. The secretary of technical education allegedly took flak because of adverse reports from the team.

Sources say Mamata has now realised the need to "draw a *lakshman rekha*" for everyone in the party. She has reportedly conveyed to party vice-president Subrata Bakshi to inform the district presidents that henceforth only the chairperson's picture (meaning hers) will be used in all publicity material. Pictures of Mamata, with Abhishek alongside, had become a regular sight of late. The directive is apparently to impress upon party leaders/ voters that "there is a single line of control and that is of the chairperson".

THE REFORMER

The TMC is often linked to its rabble-rousing politics, with even Mamata nurturing her streetfighter image. This has extended to the party, which is fraught with allegations of hooliganism and 'cut-money' (corruption). Abhishek, after his elevation, had cautioned them against using "strong-arm tactics" in the polls. He is also keen to bring in reforms such as the 'one-man, one-post' rule.

The young MP has proved that he can handle his own crises. When investigating agencies came knocking at his door, alleging the involvement of his wife in a money laundering case, Abhishek did not try to hide behind the party or Didi but dared the agencies to make public the evidence against his family. His open challenges to BJP leaders like Union home minister Amit Shah also left a big impact on young liberals looking to take on the BJP's aggressive Hindutva push.

The 34-year-old MP has been grooming himself to reach out to first-time voters. From a "kurta-pyjama neta", he has transformed into a young leader who is comfortable in denims and tees and loves his Bvlgari and Apple accessories. Abhishek is articulate and speaks English, Hindi and Bengali well, so he's quite in sync with the educated *bhadralok*, who see more of themselves in him than his aunt. The question now is whether he has overplayed his hand, and whether he can retrieve the situation in the TMC. If he does, this could be a new beginning for him. ■

ANDHRA PRADESH

Divide and Rule

By Amarnath K. Menon

ANI

Come Ugadi, the Telugu New Year on April 2, and Andhra Pradesh will double its number of districts to 26. The move is in keeping with Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy's 2019 assembly election promise to improve governance. The advantages, the Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) government claims, are plenty. For one, the reorganisation will bring district headquarters closer to the average citizen, except perhaps in the proposed Araku district. More districts also mean a greater share of Union government funds from programmes that take the district as a unit. "The reorganisation of districts is based on geographical boundaries and demographics and is not merely on the basis of parliamentary and assembly constituencies," says G.S.R.K.R. Vijaya Kumar, planning secretary, Andhra Pradesh.

To improve governance, the Jagan Reddy government has already launched the village and ward secretariat system—one for every 2,000 people—which tracks welfare schemes and delivers 545-odd government services. "There is no other instance of village self-government [in the country]. Four million people are constantly working to extend government services," the chief minister said on January 27, at the launch of the updated AP Seva Portal, a digital platform to redress public grievances.

MORE DISTRICTS WILL MEAN A GREATER SHARE OF CENTRAL FUNDS FROM PROGRAMMES THAT TAKE THE DISTRICT AS A UNIT

The district reorganisation means 24 of the 25 Lok Sabha constituencies in the state will become a separate revenue district. Only the vast Araku (reserved) constituency will be spread over two districts. Prakasam will emerge as the largest district (14,322 sq. km) while Kurnool, with a population of 2.36 million people, will be the most populous. Visakhapatnam (928 sq. km), where Jagan Reddy plans to move the administrative capital, will be the smallest. Analysts say splitting the sprawling Visakhapatnam into three districts is justifiable in terms of administrative convenience.

The Jagan Reddy government is racing against time to complete the delimitation of districts. What began

FESTIVE SPIRIT
Jagan Mohan Reddy with his wife Y.S. Bharathi Reddy at Tadepalli in Vijayawada on Makar Sankranti (January 14)

in August 2020 had to be put on hold because the Union government prohibits changes in boundaries of villages and towns once the national census has been announced. But with the pandemic-induced delay in conducting the census and the Centre easing the ban on reorganisation till July, the YSRCP government is eager to fast-track the formation of new districts.

Several districts will have thoughtfully chosen names. The one headquartered in Vijayawada is named N.T. Rama Rao, founder of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). Three others also have a wide appeal—Sri Balaji for the Tirupati-Tirumala temple region, Annamayya district after the 15th century Hindu saint Tallapaka Annamacharya, and the Puttaparthi-headquartered Sri Satya Sai district after the godman. There is also Alluri district after the illustrious freedom fighter Alluri Seetharama Raju. There are demands to rename existing districts too. Some want Kurnool to be named after Damodaram Sanjeevaiah, India's first Dalit chief minister. Others want Ananthapuram to be renamed after former president Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy. Protests have begun for changing the proposed district headquarters and inclusion of areas in one or the other district.

Even as the state government reviews suggestions and works to resolve objections by February, the emerging challenge is to raise resources to develop infrastructure for so many new district headquarters. It's undoubtedly a financial burden on the cash-strapped state. However, it also enables Jagan Reddy to provide decentralised development in an equitable manner and arguably reap dividends in the assembly election in 2024. ■

13
New districts proposed in Andhra Pradesh, taking total to 26

24
of 25 Lok Sabha seats will become a revenue district after the reorganisation

Largest district
Prakasam (14,322 sq. km)

Most populous
Kurnool (2.36 mn people)

PUNJAB P

FOUR STRONG CONTENDERS ARE PITCHED IN A MULTI-POLAR ELECTORAL BATTLE. WHO WILL WIN THE DAY—AND PUNJAB?

FOUR-WAY FIGHT *(Clockwise from left)* AAP's Bhagwant Mann at a roadshow near Garhshankar; Congress CM Charanjit Singh Channi in Chamkaur Sahib constituency; former CM Amarinder Singh meeting supporters at his farmhouse in Siswan; SAD chief Sukhbir Badal with supporters in Mandi Gobindgarh

OTBOILER

By* RAJ CHENGAPPA *and* ANILESH S. MAHAJAN *in Punjab

Photographs by BANDEEP SINGH

It's

SPRING AND PUNJAB'S LANDSCAPE is a radiant tapestry of shimmering green wheat fields and blazing yellow mustard patches. For its people, though, the winter of discontent lingers on. The flourishing frontier state has slid in recent years into a debilitating indebtedness, leaving much of its youth jobless and frustrated and its polity divided. The granary of India—Punjab produces one-fifth of India's wheat and 12 per cent of the country's rice—is grieving. Agriculture, the very thing that brought it so much prosperity, could be the kiss of death unless there is a radical shift in the existing pattern of high-intensity crop rotation between wheat and rice. Water tables have depleted to precipitous levels, as have crop productivity and income levels. The state is in the throes of a serious existential crisis and is struggling to rediscover its mojo.

On February 20, the 21 million voters of Punjab will have to choose carefully. The question before them is: who should lead them out of this dangerous quagmire? For the first time, they have a smorgasbord of parties and contestants to select from. In the past two decades, they have given decisive mandates to one or the other party to rule the state's 117-seat-strong legislative assembly. But this time around, even political pundits are puzzled. Pramod Kumar, development economist and political analyst, says, "It's actually 117 mini-elections, with each constituency an election by itself. No party seems to have any well-defined programme or distinct ideology, except freebies. They may sound different, but they don't look different. For the first time in 50 years, I find it difficult to sense which way a Punjab election is headed."

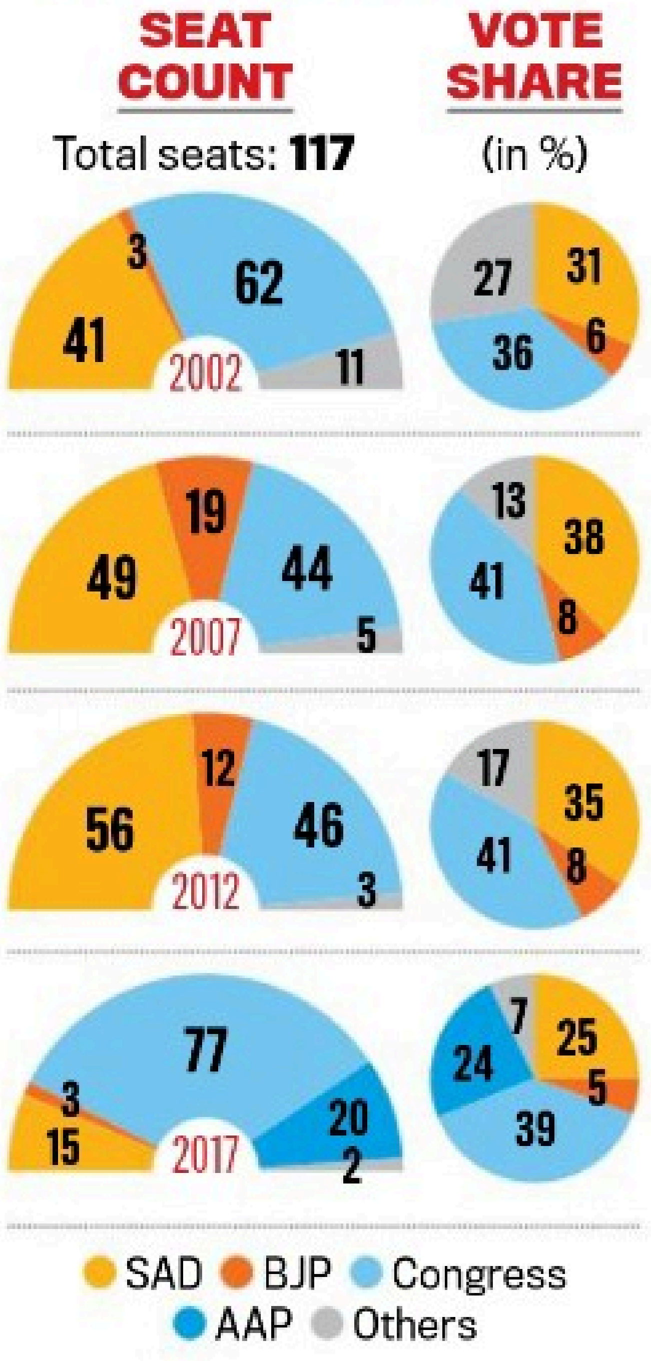
Punjab was a bipolar contest between the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), partnered by the Bharatiya Janata Party, till the Aam Aadmi party entered the fray in 2017. The three-cornered contest that year saw the Congress led by Captain Amarinder Singh, the titular maharaja of Patiala, win with an impressive majority of 77 seats. Five years later, the Congress is badly divided and struggling to put up a good fight. After a bitter and messy dethronement just five months before he could finish his term, a humiliated Amarinder formed his own party, the Punjab Lok Congress (PLC), and entered into an alliance with his lifelong adversary, the BJP, to contest this election. The Congress pulled off a mini-coup when it nominated Charanjit Singh Channi as the state's first Dalit chief minister—Punjab has India's largest Dalit population ratio, with this caste grouping accounting for a third of the vote across religions. But the party still faces dissidence from the sulking cricketer-turned-politician Navjot Singh Sidhu, who had dumped the BJP to join the Congress, and just nine months earlier emerged as its president.

If all this isn't confusing enough, the SAD, led by Sukhbir Singh Badal, broke away from its traditional alliance with the BJP in September 2020 in the wake of the now-repealed central

THE ELECTION STAKES

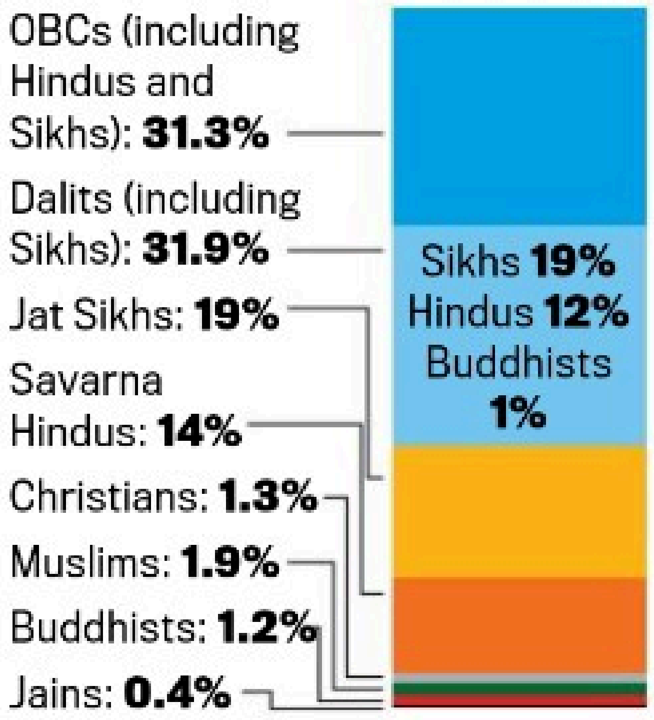
IN 2017, THE CONGRESS SWEPT PUNJAB. WHAT WILL 2022 BRING?

ASSEMBLY RECORD*



*The SAD and BJP contested as an alliance

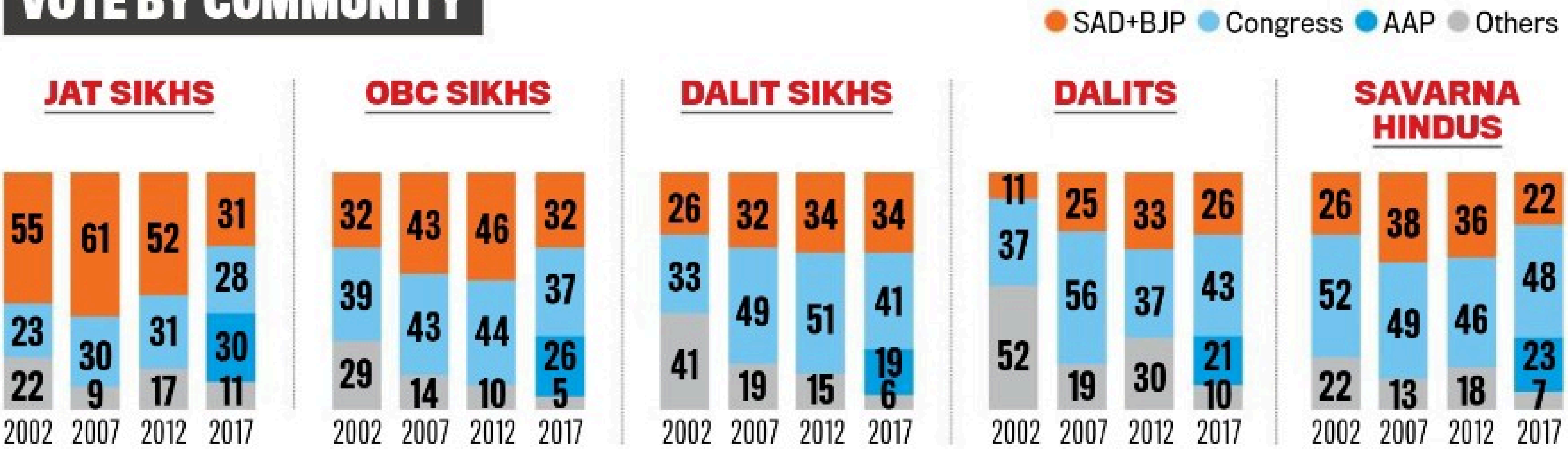
THE VOTEBANK



Figures may not total to 100% due to rounding off

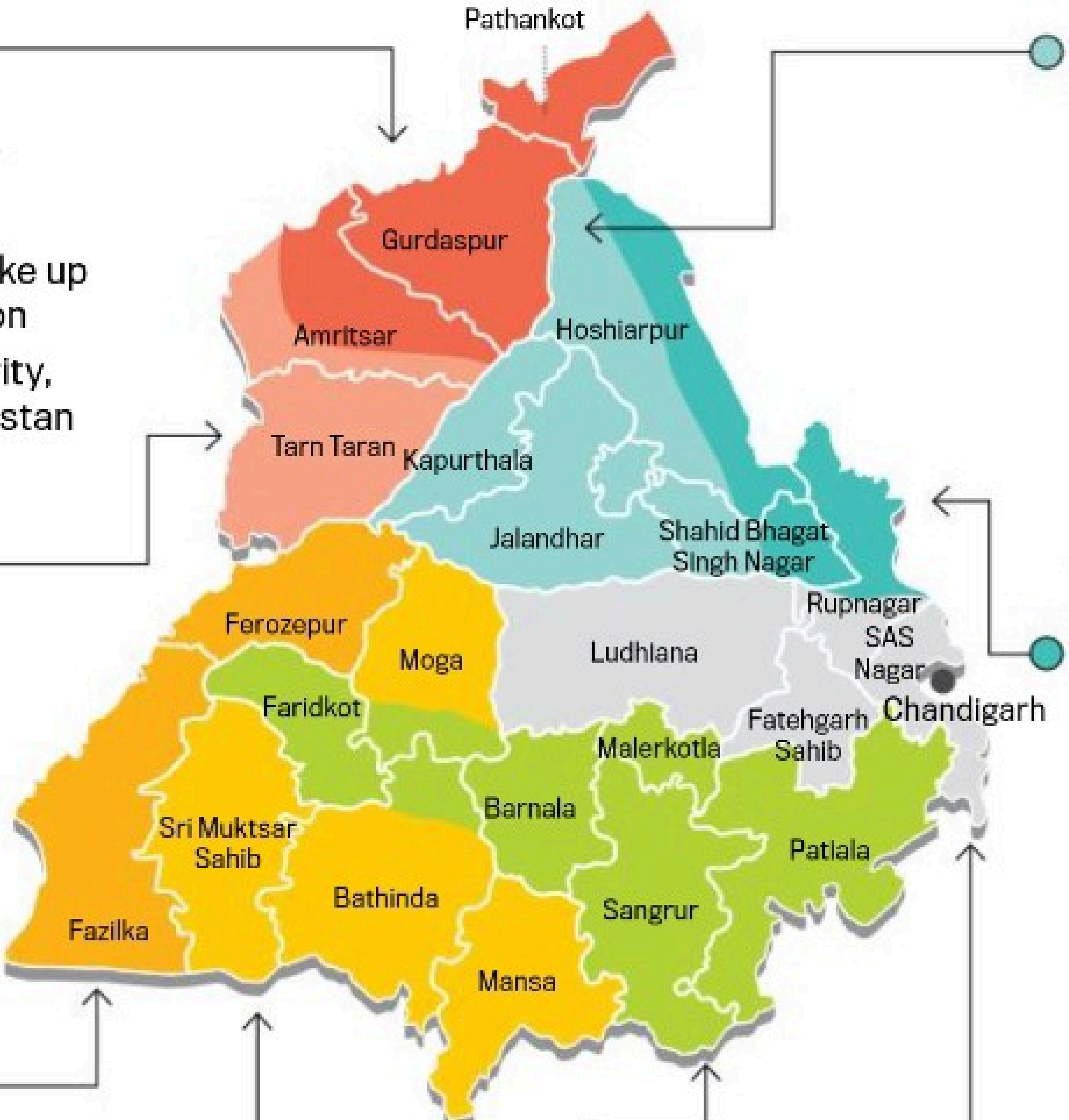
Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

VOTE BY COMMUNITY



(Figures in %)

EIGHT BATTLE ZONES


Pathankot
Gurdaspur
Amritsar
Hoshiarpur
Tarn Taran
Kapurthala
Jalandhar
Shahid Bhagat Singh Nagar
Rupnagar
SAS Nagar
Chandigarh
Ferozepur
Moga
Ludhiana
Faridkot
Fatehgarh Sahib
Malerkotla
Barnala
Patiala
Sri Muktsar Sahib
Bathinda
Fazilka
Sangrur
Mansa

UPPER MAJHA

Areas: Pathankot, Gurdaspur, half of Amritsar

Seats: 16

Demography: Hindus make up 56 per cent of the population

Concerns: National security, drugs, smuggling from Pakistan

LOWER MAJHA

Areas: Border areas of Amritsar, Tarn Taran

Seats: 9

Demography: Dominated by Jat Sikhs and Mazhabi Sikhs

Concerns: Panthic agenda. Concerns over incidents of sacrilege and conversions by evangelical Christians

DOABA

Areas: Jalandhar, Kapurthala, Hoshiarpur, Nawanshahr

Seats: 20

Demography: Dominated by Dalits; the Dera Sachkhand Ballan holds the key

Concerns: Punjab's NRI belt: Foreign education, migration, jobs, religious conversions

KANDI

Areas: Parts of Hoshiarpur, Nawanshahr and Ropar

Seats: 6

Demography: Brahmins, Rajputs and Gujjars dominate

Concerns: Polarisation against Jat Sikhs, industrialisation and farm diversification

HINDI PUNJAB

Areas: Fazilka and parts of Ferozepur

Seats: 7

Demography: Hindu Jats and Khatris dominate farming; area dominated by Rai Sikhs, Kamboj OBCs

Concerns: National security, economic stability, health

CORE MALWA

Areas: Bathinda, Mansa, Muktsar, Moga

Seats: 17

Demography: Dominated by Jat Sikhs and Baniyas in towns, and Mazhabi Sikhs; the Dera Sacha Sauda has influence

Concerns: Residual anger from farmers' stir; sacrilege issues

PHULKIAN STATES

Areas: Erstwhile princely states of the Phulkian clan–Patiala, Nabha, Faridkot, parts of Jind, Malerkotla

Seats: 21

Demography: Brahmins and Baniyas dominant in towns, Jat and Mazhabi Sikhs in villages

Concerns: Residual anger from the farmers' agitation

PUADH

Area: Ludhiana, Fatehgarh Sahib, parts of Mohali, Nawanshahr and Ropar

Seats: 21

Demography: Jat Sikhs in rural areas, Hindus in urban areas

Concerns: Industrialisation, labour issues and farm diversification

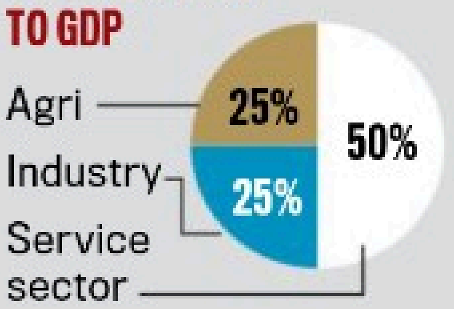
VITAL STATS

TOTAL POPULATION
30
MILLION

GSDP
₹6.44
LAKH CRORE
Growth rate **6%**
(given national average)

PER CAPITA INCOME
₹1,15,882
less than the national average of
₹1,16,067
per person

CONTRIBUTION TO GDP



DEBT
43.7%
of GSDP

FISCAL DEFICIT
3.9%
of GSDP

REVENUE
₹95,263
CRORE (PROJECTED)

EXPENDITURE
₹1.68
LAKH CRORE

Economic data is for FY2021-22 *Source: CSDS, Budget papers of Punjab govt, MoSPI, RBI* farm laws. To compensate for the loss of pooled votes from that side, and simultaneously try and dent Channi's Dalit support, it has tied up with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Promising change, the AAP has nominated as its chief ministerial candidate the two-term Lok Sabha member Bhagwant Singh Mann, a satirist whose famous one-liners have lit up the party's campaign. Adding to the jamboree is a new political formation of Punjab farmers, led by Balbir Singh Rajewal, one of the frontmen of the farm agitation that had successfully got the Modi government to repeal the farm laws. Called the Sanyukt Samaj Morcha (SSM), this collective of 22 farm unions is widely expected to cut into AAP votes, even if its primarily Jat Sikh colours have set off a counter-mobilisation among both Dalits and trading caste Hindus. All these fluid variables make this an entertaining potboiler, but its outcome will have far-reaching consequences for the state and the country.

CONGRESS

CM candidate
CHARANJIT SINGH CHANNI, 58
Alliance partner: **None**

STRENGTHS

- **Party's strong organisational structure**
- **Dalit support (32 per cent of voters) because of Channi, Punjab's first Dalit CM**
- **Goodwill among Punjabi Hindus for dealing with militancy with an iron fist**
- **Channi's selection as CM candidate ends the infighting on this issue**

CHALLENGES

- **Could lose Jat Sikh support due to choice of Dalit as CM candidate**
- **Factionalism has grown stronger since Amarinder's departure**
- **Party forced to give tickets to many sitting MLAs for fear of defections**
- **PCC chief Navjot Singh Sidhu is seen as disruptive**

Channi: The Dark Horse

When Rahul Gandhi called the 58-year-old Channi to inform him about his anointment as chief minister, he wept freely. In a state where leadership has been the preserve of Jat Sikhs, the nomination of Channi, a Dalit, was at first seen as a masterstroke by the Congress—helping it offset the odour left behind by Amarinder's messy departure. The son of a tent owner of modest means, Channi joined the Congress in 2012—ironically, when Amarinder chose him over a Congress rebel. He then also made Channi the cabinet minister for technical education when the Congress came to power in 2017. The reversal of fortunes has left a trail of personal pique, and loaded repartee. Amarinder thinks Channi was a competent minister but has "no bandwidth to be a chief minister". Channi brushes aside this deprecating assessment from his former boss, saying, "I am from a poor family, he is from a rich family. How can he accept the fact that the poor man's son is now a CM?" Channi believes that Amarinder, in joining hands with the BJP, has taken with him the anti-incumbency baggage that the Congress would otherwise have been left holding.

Although initially adjudged to be an innocuous stopgap CM, the beneficiary of feelgood tokenism before a dodgy election, the new chief minister proved wilier than his detractors had bargained for. After taking over, Channi launched a freebie spree, reducing power tariffs and waiving old dues for 5 million consumers, among other things. He then took on what he called "established mafias" by reducing the rates for sand by almost two-thirds and lodging an FIR against Bikram Singh Majithia, the brother-in-law of Sukhbir Badal, for a case involving illicit drugs. That saw his stock rise. He endeared himself further to Punjab's public by dancing the bhangra at functions, stopping and chatting with bystanders during road trips and generally making himself accessible to the public—a stark contrast to Amarinder's reclusiveness and perceived hauteur. While Amarinder is known to enjoy gourmet food, Channi is content with the common man's meal: a parantha and pickle topped with hot tea. He is also a hard taskmaster and sets an example—rising early morning and working till late into the night.

Channi then got the better of Sidhu in the leadership struggle last week when he was declared the chief ministerial candidate for the upcoming poll. Till that time, the Congress had stayed tactically neutral, saying it would fight the polls under the collective leadership of a formidable trio: Channi (Dalit),

NEW CHIEF, OLD JOB
Congress candidate CM Charanjit Channi in Chamkaur Sahib

THOUGH INITIALLY ADJUDGED AN INNOCUOUS STOPGAP CM, CHANNI PROVED WILIER THAN HIS DETRACTORS, SIDHU, IN PARTICULAR

Sidhu (Jat Sikh) and Sunil Jakhar (Hindu). But Sidhu continued to taunt Channi's leadership with statements like, "People at the top want a weak chief minister who can dance to their tunes—*tha tha thaiyya*. Do you want such a CM?" At this point, Channi called for clarity. What helped him was AAP declaring Mann as its chief ministerial candidate. While driving to a rally recently, with Rahul, Sidhu and AICC general secretary (organisation) K.C. Venugopal all in the same car, Channi popped the question. He said a clear choice would be good either way, and that he was willing to make way for anyone the party chose. Sidhu fell into the trap and offered to do the same, believing he was the more popular of the two. Rahul then called for an internal poll—after getting both leaders to commit to accept the decision. As it turned out, Channi won that round, leaving Sidhu in a stunned spell of silence, rare for him. But he had already ensured, with his untrammelled airing of views, that Channi had lost some of his sheen.

Armed with a clear mandate, that's what he's trying to recover. On a trip to his constituency Chamkaur Sahib, about an hour's drive from Chandigarh, Channi points to a water tank and newly-paved road at a village, to make the point that in the 111 days he was in power, he had brought speedy development across the state. "While AAP makes only promises, we have already delivered," he said. "If I am given a full five years by the people, I can achieve a lot." At one of the villages, people wave flags with the Congress hand symbol and the words, "*Sadda Channi, Sadda CM* (Our Channi, our CM)". Yet the Congress and Channi

BUT SERIOUSLY...
AAP CM candidate Bhagwant Mann at a roadshow near Balachaur

face an uphill task. Anti-incumbency remains a factor. The Ramdassia sect that Channi belongs to commands only a fourth of the total 32 per cent Dalit vote and Channi has to work hard to win the confidence of his other Dalit brethren. The flip side is that a Dalit unification may not be to the liking of the powerful Jat Sikhs, who still tend to view them through the prism of the old landlord-serf relationship. So they may consolidate behind the Akali Dal. Channi is also seen as more of a leader of the Doaba belt than one native to Malwa proper, the region that has the maximum number of assembly seats (69) and where most of the Dalits reside. The Congress has allowed Channi to also contest from Bhadaur in Barnala district in Malwa to shore up votes among the Mazhabi Sikhs/ Valmikis, a Dalit segment often opposed to Ravidassia dominance. Another negative factor is that the fear of further rebellion has seen a nervous Congress nominate a majority of its sitting MLAs, even the non-performers, which could cost them at

AAM AADMI PARTY

Chief ministerial candidate
BHAGWANT MANN, 48
Alliance partner: None

STRENGTHS

- Party seen as the best alternative to the SAD and the Congress
- Its poll promises, including Rs 1,000 per month to all women, are a big draw
- Bhagwant Mann is popular, particularly in the Malwa region
- The party is pushing hard to win support among Dalits and Hindus

CHALLENGES

- Lack of pan-Punjab presence; the party is especially weak in the Doaba and Majha regions
- Mann's mercurial temperament and allegations of alcohol abuse do him no credit
- The party lacks organisational strength across the state
- About half its candidates are turncoats from other parties

HAVING MANN AS ITS CM CANDIDATE SHOULD REASSURE SIKH VOTERS THAT AAP WILL NOT BE HINDU-DOMINATED

the hustings. But if Channi does lead the Congress to victory, he will become a national figure—perhaps only the second Dalit from Punjab to attain that after Kanshi Ram.

Mann: The Maverick

For a satirist, it's an ironic fate that has befallen Mann: to be the butt of jokes made by his political opponents. Hitting two of his betes noires with one stone, Amarinder describes Mann as another Sidhu—"except he doesn't sit and laugh in his chair but does stand-up jokes". Channi says Mann is unfit for the job because there's a vast difference between running a state and being on stage. It's a mark of Punjab's multi-polar battle that he too resorts to double-edged humour, taking a swipe at his former boss while going for Mann! He says, "Captain Saab closes shop at 4 pm and the party begins at home. Mann does that from 6 pm onwards—only a two-hour difference." Sukhbir is more direct, "He is a binge drinker and I dread the day people like him are made to the lead the state."

The 48-year-old Mann remains unfazed by the avalanche of taunts. "I am a satirist and social critic, not a comedian," he begins his retort. "It was Captain Saab who made a joke of the people's verdict. For four and a half years, he didn't open the doors of his palace to them." He brushes aside Sukhbir's remarks saying, "People don't trust him anymore. He doesn't go to Parliament, though he is an MP. And they have been trying to fix me with such remarks for the past seven years." As for Channi, he chooses to try and dismantle his core strength. "He calls himself an *aam aadmi* (common man) but has declared property of over Rs 110 crore. He is a *nakli* (fake) *aam aadmi*," says Mann. Like Channi, Mann too wept openly when he was anointed chief ministerial candidate by AAP national convenor Arvind Kejriwal.

That decision was taken to stymie Opposition criticism on a sensitive point that had harmed AAP even last time: the idea that Kejriwal was positioning himself to become CM of Punjab if AAP wins. Having Mann as the CM face would reassure Sikh voters that the party was not going to be a Hindu-dominated one. But it hasn't stopped the barbs insinuating that Mann would be just a rubber stamp for Kejriwal, who plans to run the state remotely. The talk gained traction when, initially, the party distributed campaign flags displaying its broom symbol and Kejriwal's face, adorned with the slogan *Ek Mauka Kejriwal Nu* (One chance for Kejriwal). Mann counters the charge of him being just a puppet, saying, "Captain went to Delhi as CM to meet Sonia Gandhi and she refused to see him. Punjab has to bear that shame. Look at Channi...he is called to Delhi so frequently. In contrast, in the past four months, I went to Delhi maybe once. It is Kejriwal who comes to Punjab."

There is little doubt that of the four major formations in the fray, AAP is the one that represents change—that has also been the leitmotif of its campaign. And there's some resonance on the ground for its overall vibe: that AAP is a baggage-free, as-yet-untainted entity and, given a chance, would prove its worth. The sentiment cuts across age groups. That Mann was getting voter traction was evident when he took out a long vehicular rally that began in Anandpur Sahib and wended its way through major towns in the Doaba region. In every town, enthusiastic workers joined the convoy in trademark Punjab fashion—on tractors with disco lights flashing and speakers blaring patriotic songs about Bhagat Singh, and restless lines of cars and two-wheelers carrying AAP flags. Mann stood atop an SUV waving his hands and accepting garlands tossed towards him. The Bhagat Singh addition is a nice touch, for Mann has often mentioned that he is inspired by the freedom fighter and had taken a pledge in front of his portrait before his swearing-in at the Lok Sabha in 2014. He now sports a basanti-coloured turban as a symbol of his admiration for him. The spring, the mustard fields... all the metaphors seemed to be coming together for him.

Yet Mann will need more than high symbolism—and more substance to his vision than is contained in the bunch of freebies that AAP is promising—to win over the electorate. In 2017, AAP seemed poised to sweep the polls but flattered to deceive. In the end, it did get an impressive 24 per cent vote share, but found itself with only 20 seats. This time, the party is being doubly cautious, with minders from Delhi controlling Mann's movements and interviews to prevent any snafu like the one Kejriwal caused in 2017, when he was seen courting people with Khalistani links. The Hindu voters then rallied around the Congress, and brought it victory. Mann is focusing on unemployment, but the actual agenda for job creation seems unclear. As Kumar points out, "Change cannot be brought merely by exchanging a blue turban for the white topi of AAP. The party is now packed with dropouts from all other parties—what's the change?" That's the question Mann and his compatriots will have to answer well before the polling date of February 20.

A FAMILIAR FACE
SAD chief Sukhbir Singh Badal on the Rajpura-Patiala highway

Sukhbir: The CM as CEO

Sukhbir Badal is a picture of confidence. As his cream-coloured Toyota Land Cruiser speeds down a gleaming four-laned state highway to Mandi Gobindgarh, once the steel town of Punjab, the 59-year-old, seated in front, turns around to say, "Just look at the quality of roads—this is what I got done in the 10 years that we were in power. What Punjab needs is a strong, decisive and passionate chief minister like me—not comedians." Sukhbir is unapologetic about his vast business interests that include hotels, transport vehicles and TV channels, saying that he does not run these directly and is only a promoter. "A person who runs a successful business can also successfully run a state," he says. "The CM should be the CEO of the state—he must have vision and know how to get people to implement it."

The younger Badal is now his own boss and, for the first time in an assembly election, in full control of SAD. He has come out from the shadow of his father, Parkash Singh Badal, who has had a record five terms as chief minister and is still contesting, at the age of 94. Sukhbir says his father taught him how to solve complex problems with patience, adding, "It is experience you cannot gain anywhere else." He shrugs off criticism about the Akali legacy devolving into a dynastic monopoly—his wife, Harsimrat Kaur, was a Union minister; her brother, Bikram Singh Majithia is a party strongman-MLA. He says he had to work hard to win the party's confidence and demonstrate his organisational capabilities. After decades, SAD is fighting without the BJP as an ally—having walked out of the Union cabinet in a bid to minimise damage to the party by the taint of association after the farm laws. Amarinder believes that act of protest alone does not absolve the Akali Dal of the blame and that Punjab farmers are still upset with them. The former CM points out that issues like the desecration of sacred Sikh texts and Punjab's drug mafias—part of the reasons why SAD was defeated by the Congress in 2017—are still relevant in this election.

AT HIS RALLIES, SUKHBIR IS PLAYING UP THE FACT THAT THE SHIROMANI AKALI DAL IS THE ONLY TRUE PUNJABI PARTY

Sukhbir counters this with the fact that, despite being in power for four and a half years, Amarinder failed to establish any conspiracy behind the alleged desecrations or to back up the allegations of Majithia being involved in drug trafficking. He is contemptuous of the alliance Amarinder's PLC has forged with the BJP, saying, "Zero plus zero equals zero." He has no regrets about the SAD parting ways with the BJP saying, "In 2017, we fought 94 seats and the BJP only 23. Out of our 94 seats, in about 60, they contributed zero votes to us." Instead, SAD has tied up with the BSP—"I made one call to Mayawati and she agreed"—and believes it would bring a minimum of 5,000 votes in some areas and "around 30,000 votes per constituency in Doaba". The BSP in Punjab has cadre among Dalit Sikhs too, many with panthic leanings. They see going with the Akalis as

SHIROMANI AKALI DAL

CM candidate
SUKHBIR SINGH BADAL, 59
Alliance partner
Bahujan Samaj Party

STRENGTHS

- Strong organisational structure
- Its campaign got off to an early start
- Assured support of Jat Sikhs
- Badal seen as a doer with a vision for Punjab's development

CHALLENGES

- Party still dogged by the emotive sacrilege and drug issues
- Remains dominated by a single family, the Badals
- Has lost some caste Hindu support following its split with BJP
- Alliance with BSP has not fetched much traction yet

AMARINDER COMES WITH THE BAGGAGE OF ANTI-INCUMBENCY BUT HE CAN ALSO HELP BJP SPLIT THE CONGRESS VOTE

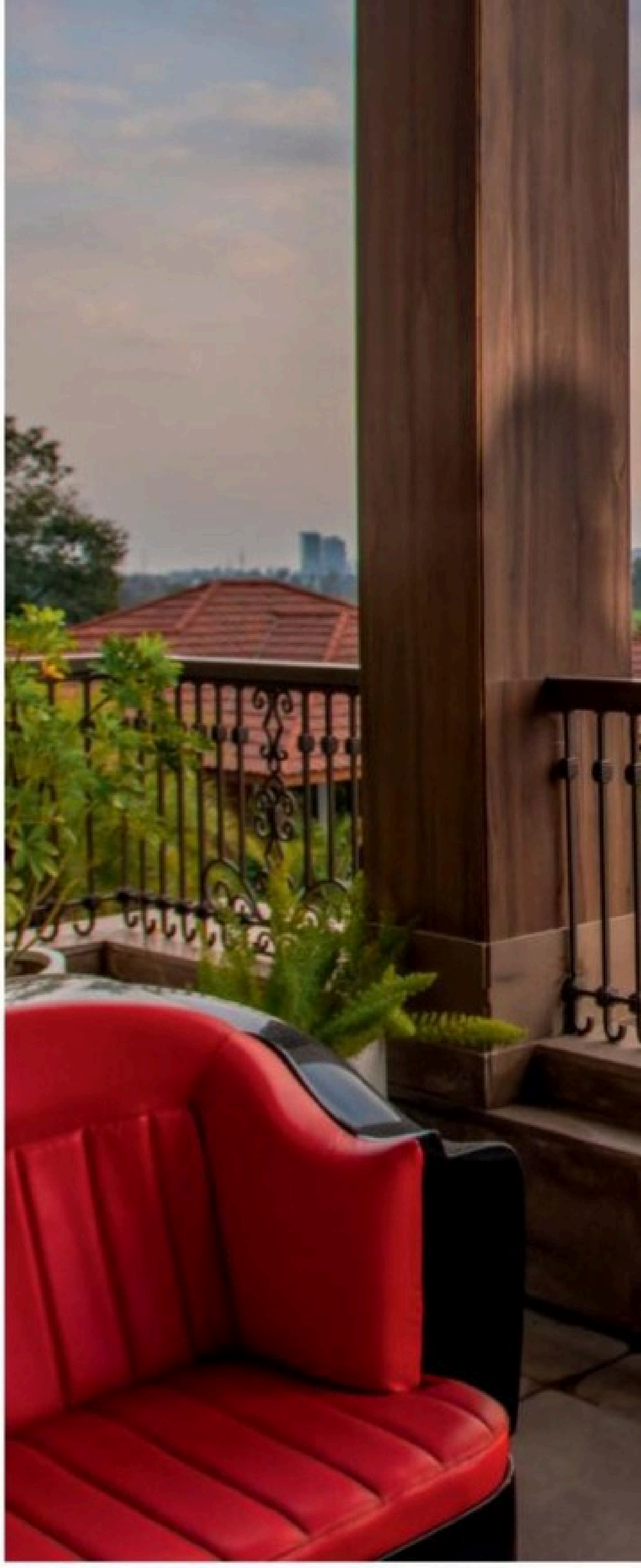
Sikh consolidation, a better option for them than sharing power with the Hindutva-oriented BJP. In the past six months, Sukhbir has also managed to bring most of the splinter groups of the Akali Dal back into the party fold, including those led by Ranjit Singh Bhrampura, Rattan Singh Ajnala and Ujagar Singh Wadali. He has accommodated panthic leaders like Prem Singh Chandumajra, Tota Singh and Sikander Singh Maluka by inducting their sons, whether by giving them tickets or by appointing them in the party's organisational set-up. These moves have strengthened SAD's hold over its traditional panthic voters.

The reason Sukhbir believes SAD could win is because "more than any other party, we have the best organisation" and the fact that SAD "is the only true Punjabi party". That is a point he hammers home in the small gatherings of traders and businessmen at Mandi Gobindgarh. He attacks Kejriwal saying that the Delhi CM is trying to impose a franchise model unsuited to Punjab. He also emphasises a potential conflict of interest—Kejriwal wants the Sutlej Yamuna Link Canal to bring water to Delhi, to the detriment of Punjab. He ends by promising to take development to the next level and make it easy to do business. Besides AAP and the farmer unions, it now has a new challenger in the urban seats: the BJP and its allies. So Sukhbir is using all possible means to neutralise that by wooing the Hindus: he has given tickets to 35 Hindu candidates. Sukhbir's advantage is that he has kicked off his campaign much earlier than the other parties after having firmed up ticket distribution. Like a good CEO, Sukhbir is reportedly also preparing for all eventualities, and that includes eyeing post-election allies in the event of a hung house.

Amarinder: His Last Stand

Politics can make strange bedfellows. Amarinder, with his 14-year-long detour through Akali politics post 1984, is no monochrome politician but even he would have been surprised at the path his life took last September. First, a demotion from chief ministership, then a complete ouster from the Congress party. The parting was acrimonious: a bruised captain had lashed out at the Gandhis, accusing them of betraying him and treating him like a piece of furniture. Months later, at his sprawling mansion on the outskirts of Chandigarh, quite the royal affair with softly gurgling fountains, a swimming pool and the model of a yesteryear Jaguar with a tabletop for sundowners on the balcony, Amarinder seemed more composed. "I don't feel the betrayal anymore, but they weren't able to judge me properly and that's what puts me off. They didn't realise that I still had something to give the country and if I could do it, why I should quit." That hurt drew him to form his own party, the Punjab Lok Congress, at 79 years of age, and to ally with the BJP.

So why didn't he just join the BJP? Amarinder's candid reply: "I felt that secularism has been the background in our family and I told Amit Shahji



PUNJAB LOK CONGRESS

STRENGTHS

- Its alliance with the BJP, which will help it win support from Hindu voters
- Amarinder Singh is well thought of among moderate Sikhs
- Can play 'double engine sarkar' card, given its alliance with BJP
- Could benefit from the repeal of the BJP's controversial farm laws

FAR HORIZONS
Former CM Amarinder Singh at his farmhouse in Siswan, near Chandigarh

CM candidate
AMARINDER SINGH, 79
Alliance partners
BJP, SAD (Sanyukt)

CHALLENGES

- Residual anger over the BJP's attempt to ram through farm reforms
- Amarinder Singh's anti-incumbency baggage
- Alliance partner BJP's lack of pan-Punjab presence
- Delays in kicking off campaign and ticket distribution

that I want to join your fight but I am not going to join your party. He accepted it and asked me to call and speak to the prime minister the next day." Amarinder soon got a taste of just how early Narendra Modi works, when at 6.30 am he was woken up by a call from Shah who said the PM was on the line and wanted to speak to him. The PM expressed his happiness at the development and thus began the alliance between the PLC and the BJP. The BJP offered 37 seats and Amarinder agreed because, as he put it, "It was based on the availability of candidates. I could probably have asked for 10 more seats, but we are a new party and we didn't want to take on more than we could chew."

The BJP soon realised how difficult it would be for the PLC to get its act together. A BJP office-bearer remarks, "We had to do most of the organising for them and getting money for their candidates to fight. It was like running two parties." Five of Amarinder's candidates have, in fact, opted to fight on the BJP symbol. With that, the party is contesting 73 seats—the largest number they have ever contested in Punjab. The party also tied up with Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa's SAD (Sanyukt), giving it 16 seats. The BJP's game plan is that, with Amarinder and Dhindsa on their side, they have two credible Jat Sikhs who could help them gain access to that side of the landscape while the party consolidates the Hindu vote in Punjab, which is a sizeable 38 per cent.

The Hindus have traditionally voted for the Congress as they still remember the party's tough stand against militancy. The BJP realises that Amarinder comes with the baggage of anti-incumbency, but he could also help split the Congress. The strategy seems to be working as the Congress, fearing a further depletion, retained most of its MLAs for the contest, even if perceived to be non-performers. Amarinder has also helped the BJP get into Sikh institutions that have moderate Sikh preachers and build a rapport with them. Damdami Taksal chief Harnam Singh Dhumma, for instance, had issued a public statement praising the prime minister for declaring December 26 'Veer Baal Diwas' as a tribute to the martyrdom of Guru Gobind Singh's younger sons Zorawar Singh and Fateh Singh. Amarinder is believed to be very close to this seminary. With Dera Sacha Sauda chief Ram Rahim Singh out on a furlough, BJP leaders are using Amarinder's network to reach out to him for political support—that's a substantial number among the non-elite castes. BJP leaders and Amarinder believe that the elections will most likely throw up a hung house. They have two options: team up with SAD again to form a government or, if no favourable permutations are within reach, have President's rule imposed.

Khichdi is usually a winter dish in the north. But there are many who see a platterful of it coming in the spring of 2022—the sheer number of ingredients going into the Punjab potboiler seem to make that a likely outcome. The delicious irony is that each side thinks it has a chance. AAP, which has a perceptible quantum of street cred, is hoping this will be their breakout opportunity. The Congress under Channi thinks voters may give the state's first Dalit CM a second term. Sukhbir feels he deserves to be CM after having served as his father's deputy for years. If he falls short of numbers, he could build bridges with the BJP. Or, as a wildcard, even join hands with the Congress—presently a taboo thought for the panthic party. But as the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi has shown, anything is possible in politics. Will the War of the Sardars hold a twist in the tale? Like with most potboilers, everyone will still be guessing the climax right up to the forenoon of March 10. ■

CHARANJIT SINGH CHANNI

AMARINDER SINGH

INTERVIEW

FOUR CORNERED VISION

BHAGWANT MANN

SUKHBIR SINGH BADAL

Busy on their respective campaign trails, the Big Four of this Punjab election take time out to answer a few key questions, in exclusive interviews to Group Editorial Director Raj Chengappa and Senior Editor Anilesh S. Mahajan. Excerpts

Q. What are the key issues in this election?

> CHARANJIT CHANNI: I come from a poor family. I know how hard it's for the poor to get their dal and rice. If the government keeps on providing aata and dal, it will only keep them poor. They need quality education and healthcare. I will ensure that. There are two kinds of society in the making. One, those who go to government schools and learn in Punjabi medium, and others who have access to private schools and learn in English. I am focused on providing quality education. Similarly, healthcare needs to be strengthened. We also need agro-based industry. To eradicate poverty, you need to focus on youngsters and, apart from providing them with quality education, we need to build an ecosystem that allows young people to launch startups. Even if they want to set up a transport business, cottage industry... the state should be the facilitator.

> BHAGWANT MANN: Unemployment is the biggest issue. It is at the core of many problems in our state. If unemployed, even those with MSc, MBBS or engineering degrees queue up for IELTS to go to Canada or Australia. It's brain drain. Every student going abroad drains Rs 25 lakh with him; a few years on, their family too migrates. Those who cannot clear IELTS or migrate fall into bad company or depression. Many resort to drug abuse. We want our students to be employed here. I haven't ever heard of anyone employed and taking drugs. Providing people jobs according to their educational skills and degrees is the main issue.

> SUKHBIR BADAL: We must take Punjab to the next level. People are expecting development and prosperity. To achieve that, Punjab needs a strong, decisive and passionate leadership. We don't need comedians but people who have the vision to build the state.

> AMARINDER SINGH: People are going to look out for their tummies and jobs. Everyone wants money and the farmers certainly want more, the industrialists want more. Both industrial growth and agricultural growth are important and we need to come out with new ideas for that. We will have to make commitments for jobs—that's going to be our major thing.

Q. Why should people vote for you?

> CHANNI: I have been informing my people about the reduced rates of electricity, water, petrol and diesel, and sand facilitated by my government, as well as the schemes launched to help start new businesses and the free bus rides provided to women and students. With so much work done in 111 days, I have become popular. If I get to work for a five-year term, imagine how much I can achieve. Anti-incumbency, if any, is against Captain Amarinder Singh, not the Congress. We are fortunate he left the Congress on his own. The sufferings of the Congress were because of him. By accepting him into their fold, the BJP has inherited that sentiment.

> MANN: I am from among the people. I am not from a palace. To people, I am like their son or nephew—their very own. The Badals have huge walls in their palace; even a bird can't sit there and chirp. My opponents call me a mere comedian. They are wrong—I am a satirist, a social critic. When I speak about cancer deaths, farmer deaths or corruption, are these jokes? These political parties have made a mockery of our country. We will give the people of Punjab an honest, transparent and well-intentioned government.

"Unemployment is the biggest issue and is causing brain drain. We want our students to get employment in Punjab"

BHAGWANT MANN

> BADAL: Because of the development we ushered in while in power, we got every district of Punjab connected with good roads. All new power plants in the state were built during the Akali regime. Punjab needs a decisive leader. The chief minister is like a CEO of the state. People can rely on me for speedy development. We are the only Punjabi party—the rest are national parties and do not understand Punjab like we do. For instance, Arvind Kejriwal has written to the Supreme Court that thermal plants in Punjab be shut because they cause pollution. A national party will always have a clash of interest with the state.

> AMARINDER: I offer experience. I have been in this game for 50 years and know what my state requires. I will not offer freebies for everyone, like Channi and the others are doing. That is absolute rubbish because where do you get the money for these sops from? When my government gave something, it was with a purpose, such as free health insurance. I will ensure both industrial and agricultural growth.

Q. What is your solution to the agricultural crisis in the state?

> CHANNI: We need to switch to organic farming and get relief from pesticides and urea—the silent killers. We need to fix a separate MSP for organic crops. Then, all farmers will shift to organic farming and the health of our country will improve. We also need to diversify from rice to other crops since the water table in Punjab has been dropping alarmingly. If we leave barren lands for our future generations by depleting water, how will they survive? In order to improve this situation, we need to grow crops such as pulses, corn, etc. For that, the government needs to ensure higher MSP.

> MANN: Guru Nanak said *uttam kheti* (farming is the best), *madhyam vyapar* (trade comes next), *neech naukri* (job is the worst). He gave agriculture top priority, whereas the reverse is happening now. Farming is no longer profitable. The central farm laws were repealed. We won this struggle. But farmers have been committing suicide even before these laws were introduced. The Punjab Agricultural University (PAU) should be at the centre of planning. We will strengthen it. We intend to create more awareness among farmers by employing two graduates in every village to provide the necessary knowledge. This will create at least 40,000 jobs. The other problem is paddy. To grow a kilo of paddy, 3,800 litres of water are required. This has caused a water crisis in

"Cheaper power, water, fuel; schemes to help start businesses... So much has been achieved in 111 days"

CHARANJIT CHANNI

Punjab. We can grow maize, barley, millets and other crops. Our land is fertile, but we neither have marketing infrastructure nor assured MSP procurement. We will create cooperatives and reduce production costs.

> BADAL: Farmers should have a guaranteed market and price. Unless the Centre guarantees MSP purchase of, say, maize, farmers will not diversify. They should allow ethanol in a big way. States should have enough financial power to support these initiatives.

> AMARINDER: Punjab's mainstay in agriculture is paddy, which India does not need any more as we have got plenty stored. India is importing pulses worth Rs 1.5 lakh crore every year. Give me Rs 25,000 crore out of this sum and we will persuade farmers to shift from paddy to pulses. We will get paddy out of the way and also save water.

Q. What needs to be done for industrial development?

> CHANNI: Agricultural output is at its peak in Punjab. We have done what we could do. Now, we need to shift gear towards agro industries and focus on industrialisation. From cottage to big industry, we need revival. We need support from the Centre. Ours is a border state. We need incentives, and the Centre should look into it.

"The Akalis gave Punjab good roads, new power plants. We are the only Punjabi party in the fray"

SUKHBIR BADAL

> MANN: Traders are moving around with bags full of money for politicians. They aren't doing so out of admiration. Traders are going to politicians across the spectrum to please them and ensure that they don't come after them upon assuming power. Governments are not formed to harass people. But these days, traders fear for their success. Mandi Gobindgarh used to be a steel hub. Not anymore. We will change this. We will woo industry from Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and other states.

> BADAL: We will focus on the priority sectors. IT is one such sector as its potential in South India is exhausted. If IT firms move north, we can offer them the best locations, international airports, good hotels. We need to promote tourism in a big way. We will start 2 or 3 big projects to develop food processing. Within a year of coming to power, I will ensure a paperless government towards ease of doing business. Once you make the process paperless, 99 per cent of corruption and hindrances will be over. Industrialists, and not bureaucrats, should frame industrial policies because that will make them accountable.

> AMARINDER: The main thing is that we need money and policies that encourage industry to come to Punjab.

Q. What is your view about your opponents?

> CHANNI: Sukhbir Badal is arrogant and relies on muscle power. All members of his family are involved in politics. He is only a good businessman. Bhagwant Mann is no challenge; he is a mere rubber stamp. Even AAP posters ask people to give Kejriwal an opportunity. By choosing Captain Sahib as its face, the BJP has damaged its reputation. He will get no seats in this election.

> MANN: The mafia in Punjab is a creation of the Badals. Amarinder Singh took it one step forward. It's evident that they work in tandem. Captain Sahib made a joke of the people's verdict. Charanjit Channi claims he is a commoner but has declared property worth over Rs 110 crore. He is a fake *aam aadmi*.

> BADAL: Charanjit Channi is a nobody. He is neither charismatic nor has statewide appeal. Channi may lose both the seats he is contesting from. Captain Sahib's alliance with the BJP is zero plus zero equals zero. Regarding Bhagwant Mann, I dread the day people like him are chosen to lead the state. He is just a drunkard.

> AMARINDER: There is no doubt that people feel the need for a change, but you need someone of competence to bring that about. Bhagwant Mann is incapable of running the state. All he has done is stand up and crack jokes. About Sukhbir Badal, the people have not forgotten the sacrilege issue and the narcotics problem. Charanjit Channi has limited capabilities. He lacks the bandwidth to be a chief minister. ■

"I offer experience. I have been in this game for 50 years and know what my state requires"

AMARINDER SINGH

YADAV MIGHT
Akhilesh at an SP Vijay Rath rally in Mainpuri, Dec. '21

ANI

ASSEMBLY POLLS 2022

UTTAR PRADESH

THE Y-AXIS: Eight Squares on the Chessboard

The 'Yadav belt' in western UP is a traditional Samajwadi fortress. Can the party regain the ground it lost in 2017 or will the BJP spring another surprise?

BY ASHISH MISRA

The political mobility of caste groups—real and potential, en bloc or piecemeal—defines elections in Uttar Pradesh. All the knife-edge speculation this time has tended to focus on two geographical extremes: the western provinces, mostly because of Jat disaffection with the BJP, or Poorvanchal, where a complex play of algorithms could swing the game any which way. Everywhere, the focus has been on non-Yadav castes—OBC or otherwise. That presumes the Yadav element in the mix is a constant rather than a variable. But the Samajwadi Party has reasons to harbour a creeping disquiet on that point. So, the question for the BJP's chief rival may well be: will the centre hold?

A terrestrial trawl through the 'Yadav belt' of central UP gives us a more fine-grained picture of the fascinating caste catalysis on the ground. Zero in on a physical border: Jain Inter College, in Mainpuri district, is where the Karhal assembly seat starts. Just 6 km south of it is Saifai, ancestral village of SP founder Mulayam Singh Yadav, which falls in Etawah. In 1963, Mulayam started working here as an assistant teacher (he was promoted as lecturer in the department of political science in 1974, though by then he was already into his second term as an MLA). There is a festive mood at the college. Akhilesh Yadav, Mulayam's son and national president of SP, is contesting from Karhal. Before filing his nomination on January 31, the former chief minister had visited and taken the blessings of the teachers. He even promised to upgrade it to a university if the SP wins.

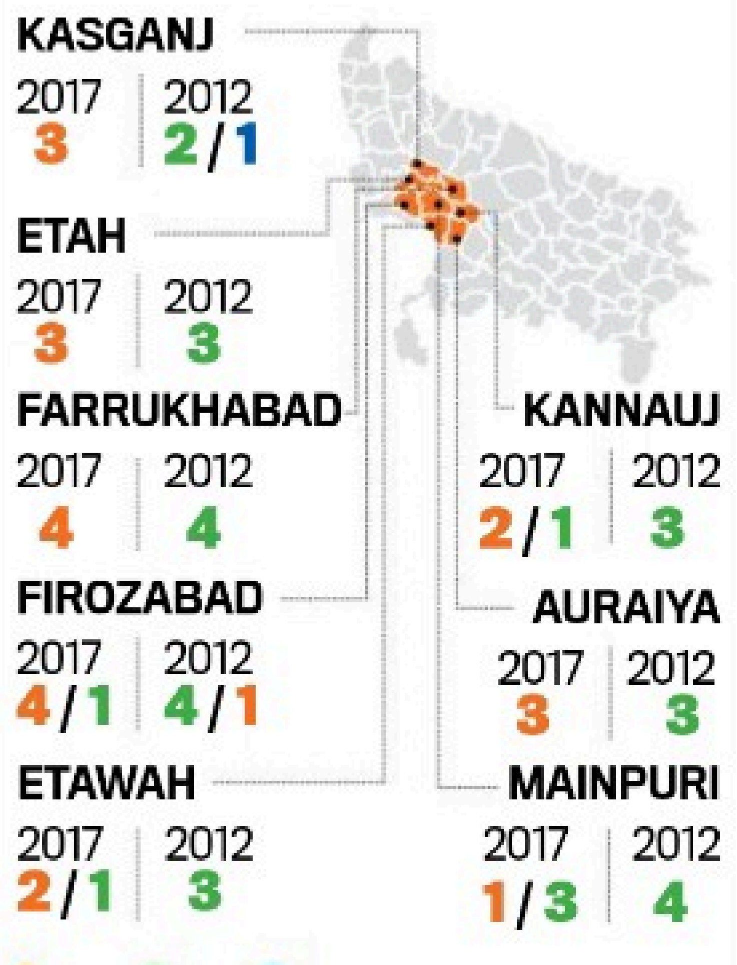
Akhilesh is contesting for the first time from Karhal, part of Mulayam's parliamentary constituency, Mainpuri. The area is an SP fortress; in the six assembly polls held since the party was formed in 1992, it has won the seat five times. Even during the BJP wave in 2017, Karhal stayed true to the SP. It wasn't the same in the eight districts around Mainpuri-Etawah—known as the "Yadav belt" for the sway the community has in the region—which witnessed the SP's worst performance since its formation (see *BJP's Rise...*). These have a total of 28 seats; in 2012, the SP won 26 of these seats but in 2017 they were left with six.

In that sense, it's a strategic move for Akhilesh to contest from Karhal: an attempt to reconsolidate. Padma Tripathi, head of the department of economics at K.K. PG College, Etawah (incidentally Mulayam's alma mater), says, "Saifai is the focal point of politics in many districts here, including Mainpuri, Firozabad and Auraiya. Yadavs are dominant in every seat here. The internal disputes in the Mulayam family clearly affected the results in 2017." By contesting from Karhal, Akhilesh hopes to exude a

IN THE YADAV DOMINION

- There are **28 ASSEMBLY SEATS** in the 'Yadav belt'. This dominant OBC group makes up over 20% of the voters in every seat
- Over 20% of the voters are Muslims in 22 of these seats. The **M-Y VOTERS ARE OVER 40%** in 20 assembly seats
- There are **SIX RESERVED SEATS**, the SP won just 2 while the BJP took 4 in 2017
- In 2012, 10 **YADAV CASTE CANDIDATES** of the SP won the elections here. In 2017, only four such candidates won

BJP'S RISE IN SP STRONGHOLD



Source : Election Commission

Graphic by ASIT ROY

sense of renewed solidity, she adds. "It will have a ripple effect in some 100 assembly seats in the state, from west to east where the Yadavs are dominant."

BJP'S CASTE MOBILISATION

Karhal is also where the BJP is trying to score one over the SP president. But taking Akhilesh on in the SP's strongest bastion is no easy task. After much brainstorming, the party has zeroed in on Union MoS for law and justice S.P. Singh Baghel, who they feel could upend the caste equation. Padma Tripathi says, "Karhal is dominated by Yadav voters, but it also has about 35,000 Shakya votes, and some 30,000 each of Baghel and Thakur votes. The Shakya and Thakurs are the core vote bank of the BJP. Their strategy is to polarise non-Yadav votes."

Baghel, a former sub-inspector and PSO of Mulayam, was a three-time SP MP from Jalesar in Etah. After a tiff with Mulayam, he moved to the BSP, then the BJP. He has never won against any member of the Yadav family, but feels confident of his chances are good this time. "The elite castes along with the non-Yadav OBCs are with the BJP, making our challenge very strong," says Baghel. The BJP has fielded non-Yadavs who were once close to Mulayam in other a seats as well, like Om Prakash Nishad in Shikohabad (Firozabad district), and Ashu Diwakar in the Kishni reserved seat of Mainpuri. But SP leader and Saifai block chief Santosh Shakya is unfazed: "The BJP did not have candidates for many seats here, which is why they have nominated leaders of other parties. It's a sign that they are worried."

BATTLE FOR SHAKYA VOTES

An interesting battle is on for the Shakya votes in the SP stronghold areas. Alok Singh Shakya, an Etawah resident and president of the 'All India Shakya Mahasabha', says, "The Shakyas, Mauryas, Kushwahas and Sainis in UP are backward castes with a similar agrarian social structure. Every assembly seat in these eight districts has 12-15 per cent Shakya votes. Parties have been mobilising our voters to counter the political influence of the Yadavs." In 2017, the BJP had fielded Shakya candidates in four seats here, including Karhal. They won in Amritpur, Bidhuna and Patiali. To appease the Shakya community, the BJP had sent Geeta Shakya, former district president of the party in Auraiya district, to the Rajya Sabha in November 2020. Almost a year later, in September 2021, she was made president of the state Mahila Morcha.

But it may not be enough. Amatesh Shakya, principal of a private college in Auraiya, says, "In 2017, the BJP had projected then state president Keshav Prasad Maurya as the CM candidate, which is why the Shakya vote went en masse to the party. There is resentment at the way he was sidelined in the Yogi government." Senior leader Swami Prasad Maurya, who left the BJP for the SP recently, has been lambasting his former party over the neglect of the Maurya, Shakya and Kushwaha castes at every meeting in Mainpuri and Auraiya. The BJP has deployed deputy CM Keshav Prasad Maurya to counter this narrative. Local strongman Raghuraj Shakya, a two-time MP from Etawah, has also been roped in to bolster the cause.

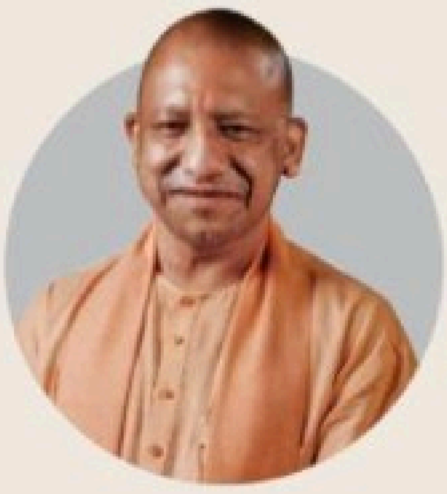
There is also the question of development. Before 2017, Akhilesh's government had started work on two major projects in the region, a trauma centre in Bewar area of Mainpuri and a sewage system in Saifai. Both have been in limbo since the Yogi Adityanath government came to power and the BJP is finding it difficult to justify the lack of action. Former Badaun MP and Akhilesh's cousin Dharmendra Yadav says, "The Yogi government has discriminated on development in Etawah, Mainpuri and adjoining districts in the past five years. It's a big issue this election."

THE MULAYAM FAMILY RIFT

The Mulayam family's internal troubles have been a gold mine for the BJP. His rebellious daughter-in-law Aparna Yadav, recalcitrant brother Shivpal Yadav, SP founding member Hari Om Yadav, the BJP has played up every little rift among them. It has also managed to poach Aparna and fielded Hari Om as its candidate from Sirsaganj in Firozabad district. A two-time MLA from the seat, he fell out with the family last year after supporting the BJP candidate for the Firozabad district panchayat president's post.

A plus for the SP is the truce with Shivpal. After falling out with Akhilesh, Mulayam's younger brother had formed the Pragatisheel Samajwadi Party (Lohia) in 2018 and damaged the SP in the 2019 Lok Sabha election. Shivpal is contesting from the Jaswant Nagar seat in Etawah as an SP candidate this time. On January 31, as soon as Akhilesh filed his nomination from Karhal, he congratulated him on social media. Shivpal says the ill will is a thing of the past. "The public will give a befitting reply to the BJP's efforts to break our bond. The Yadav family is one in seeking a win for the SP." ■

TWEET WARS

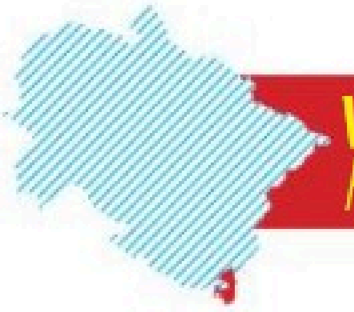


“Listen Kejriwal, when humankind was reeling under the impact of Covid, you forced workers from UP to leave Delhi... Should we call you inhumanitarian or...”

YOGI ADITYANATH
The UP CM, in response to his Delhi counterpart calling the PM’s statement on migrant workers an ‘outright lie’

“Listen Yogi, you should leave this alone. Dead bodies were floating in the river and you were spending crores to give ads...in the ‘Time’ magazine. I have not seen a more merciless and cruel ruler than you”

ARVIND KEJRIWAL
The Delhi CM’s riposte to Yogi Adityanath’s accusation



WINDOW SEAT
KHATIMA, UTTARAKAHND

Khatima Chronicles

A short distance from India’s border with Nepal, there is nothing to recommend Khatima except for its bustle as a minor business hub. However, this small town in the terai is having a brief moment in the sun this assembly election, as Uttarakhand’s young chief minister, the 46-year-old Pushkar Singh Dhami, prepares for a third win from this constituency.

Pitted against him are old, familiar foes: Bhuwan Chandra Kapri of Congress—whom he scraped past in 2017 with a slender margin of 2,709 votes—and the Bahujan Samaj Party’s Ramesh Rana. The Congress’s chief ministerial hopeful Harish Singh Rawat is in the vicinity too, contesting from the neighbouring Lalkuan constituency.

Part of the Nainital-Udham Singh Nagar Lok Sabha constituency, Khatima is slung below the foothills of the Kumaon division, which contributes 29 members to the 70-member legislative assembly. Elections here are on February 14, and Dhami is relying on the BJP slogan—*‘Abki baar, 60 paar’*—to power both his campaign and his self-belief.

Not that Dhami needs any confidence-booster. His party vested faith in him when they brought the young Kumaoni to replace two chief ministers in quick succession. What could play spoiler is Khatima’s growing complaints about its crumbling education and health infra, and the

UTTAR PRADESH

THE YOUNG TURKS

They may be a vanishing breed in Indian politics in terms of sheer numerical strength, and Uttar Pradesh may be ground zero for some of the big issues that have contributed to their marginalisation. Despite that larger existential crisis, the 2022 assembly poll seems set to make a new beginning for Muslim politics in the state. The older faces would voice ‘Muslimness’ in ways that didn’t necessarily ensure the best crossover appeal—take an Imran Masood, who hit the headlines with intemperate remarks against Narendra Modi before the 2014 general election, or Yakub Qureshi, who announced a reward of Rs 51 crore for anyone beheading the Danish cartoonists who satirised the Prophet and justified the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. Neither has a ticket to ride this time. Instead, UP is seeing the arrival of a new set: young, educated, articulate.

“Parties opposing the BJP have refrained from fielding Muslim leaders embroiled in controversies in the past and made provocative statements. They feel it contributed to counter-polarisation,” says Gyas Asad Khan, retired principal of Azamgarh’s

MANEESH AGNIHOTRI

THE MILLENNIAL MUSLIM FACE
Clockwise from top left: Abdullah Azam Khan, Haider Ali Khan, Iqra Hasan (campaigning for brother Nahid) and Syed Asif Mian

HOME GROUND
Dhami campaigning in Khatima

lack of jobs. The farmers' stir too could have a spillover effect, especially among the Jat Sikhs, who are a sizeable number in Udham Singh Nagar, of which Khatima is a part. Traditionally, the community has voted the BJP, but there is a chance it may switch loyalties. The Jat Sikhs in Khatima have roughly 10,000 votes and the Muslims another 20,000—numbers that have Dhami's team a bit jittery. On the plus side, being the incumbent CM and having the central leadership's backing has pre-empted any infighting in the local unit. Also, with the Aam Aadmi Party fielding a Jat Sikh, Swainderjit Kaler, and the All-India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen fielding Asif Mian, Team Dhami believes the electoral math is on its side. ■

PUNJAB

NO EXES BAGGAGE

It's hard times for PCC chiefs, past and present. If Navjot Sidhu is nursing a whole bunch of ruffled feathers, his predecessor Sunil Jakhar too has announced retirement from electoral politics. Their greatest common enemy is also the Congress's CM face. Sidhu at least was open about his chief ministerial ambition, but it took a viral video to expose Jakhar's aspiration—he claims he was the first choice of MLAs as Amarinder's replacement, Charanjit Channi the last. Elsewhere, the party's one family, one ticket policy left the Bajwa brothers—Partap, PCC chief till 2016, has and his sibling Fateh Jung—sulking, pushing Fateh Jung BJPward. On Feb. 3, H.S. Hanspal joined AAP and the band of unhappy ex-PCC chiefs after grandson Sundar Singh was denied a ticket. Other ex-PCC chiefs left ticketless—Mohinder Kaypee and Shamsher Dullo. ■

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

MANEESH AGNIHOTRI

MANEESH AGNIHOTRI

Shibli National College. "This time, a large number of youth leaders have become active, seeking support from all sections of society, which is a big change in Muslim politics."

Of course, it's not all honey and roses. Azam Khan, whose abrasive, combative style exemplifies the older generation, is still the Samajwadi Party candidate from Rampur. His trademark bluster is missing from UP's soundtrack though: the three dozen-odd cases against him means he has been in Rampur district jail for nearly two years. But down the narrow lane leading to his bungalow, you see crowds milling dutifully at 8 every morning. Azam Khan may be absent, but they see a reflection of his visage: his 31-year-old engineer son Abdullah Azam Khan. Released from jail just two weeks ago, he's contesting from nearby Suar Tanda. The young inheritor has taken command of campaigning in both constituencies—mingling with those morning devouts, bustling through the hi-tech party office on Baba-e-Ilm road in the forenoon, an afternoon-to-dusk whirlwind at Suar, then back in Rampur for midnight door-to-door canvassing.

He's up against another son, also pedigreed, with the Rampur ex-royalty stamp on him. Haider Ali Khan alias Hamza Mian is the Apna Dal (S) candidate for Suar Tanda—the first Muslim candidate from the BJP alliance side. Hamza's father, Nawab Kazim Ali Khan alias Naved Mian, too is in the game. The younger son of ex-Congress MP Noor Bano is contesting from Rampur against Azam—making for a first-ever direct faceoff between old rivals.

Generational change has come to Kairana too, via the same tropes of prison and a surrogate campaigner. Meet 28-year-old Iqra Hasan, an LSR graduate who went to study international law at London and caught the cameras while protesting the CAA-NRC in front of the Indian High Commission in 2019. The actual candidate, her two-time MLA brother Nahid Hasan, is in jail. They too are legatees of a family with a big place in the Muslim politics of western UP. Father: Munawwar Hasan—Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, Vidhan Sabha, Legislative Council, he had all on his resume. Grandfather: Akhtar Hasan, who defeated Mayawati, then contesting as an independent, by over 200,000 votes back in 1984. Mother: Tabassum Hasan, ex-MP.

The family controlling the Dargah-e-Ala Hazrat in Bareilly, the hub for Barelvi Muslims, usually kept its distance from politics. Not this time. Among its fractious seniors, one supports the SP, another apparently cottoned up to Yogi Adityanath. Still, a line was crossed when Syed Asif Mian, son-in-law of dargah chief Maulana Subhan Raza Khan, filed nomination as an AIMIM candidate from Khatima. To thwart any controversy, he has been relieved of all dargah posts, but he too joins the young Muslim scions effecting a generational change in UP. ■

UTTAR PRADESH

Dua, Salaam or Post-pollpourri?

Ganga-jamuni tehzeeb flowed freely in Bulandshahr on February 3 when Priyanka Gandhi's convoy passed by Akhilesh Yadav and Jayant Chaudhury's *rath* during their respective campaigns in the western UP town. All smiles, the political rivals—Priyanka the Congress general secretary in charge of UP, and Akhilesh the chief of Samajwadi Party in alliance with Jayant's Rashtriya Lok Dal—waved at each other and exchanged greetings. The camaraderie extended all the way to social media as Akhilesh posted the picture on Twitter, with the caption, '*Ek dua salaam, tehzeeb ke naam* (a greeting in the name of civility)'. Priyanka returned the favour with another photo, and a salubrious '*Hamari bhi aap ko Ram Ram* (greetings to you too)', tagging both Akhilesh and Jayant.

ANI

CROSSING PATHS
Akhilesh and Jayant greet Priyanka while campaigning in Bulandshahr

Political strategists believe there's more than meets the eye in the seemingly casual encounter. Both sides knew about the other's convoy. They stopped because they wanted to. It was a show of Opposition unity, displayed also in the Congress not fielding any candidate in seats Akhilesh and Shivpal are contesting. Whiff of a post-poll partnership? ■

UTTAR PRADESH

LADIES CORNER

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

Has that Priyanka Gandhi slogan—'*Ladki hoon, lad sakti hoon*'—coloured the electoral scene in UP, in parties beyond the Congress? The numbers may not suggest so by themselves. BJP's four lists are still overwhelmingly male. But the Congress claims the ruling party is quite cognisant, and wary, of woman-centric mobilisation. Party folk see it in the way the BJP has inducted women from other parties: Aparna Yadav from the SP, Aditi Singh from the Congress, Vandana Singh from the BSP. Add to that list Priyanka Maurya, the original poster girl of the slogan. Even if numerically modest, women are a visible factor this time, across parties, and beyond UP.

The SP seems to have taken a leaf out of the GOP playbook. Witness the arrival of Pooja Shukla, the 25-year-old student leader who waved a black flag at Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath after stopping his convoy in 2017 in Lucknow. Her candidacy from Lucknow (North), as SP's youngest candidate this election, is notable for more than one reason. After her dramatic act of protest, for which she was jailed for three weeks under various sections of the IPC, SP founder Mulayam Singh Yadav met her in prison and asked her to join mainstream politics. She joined the party's student wing before the Lok Sabha poll and also participated in the January 2020 anti-CAA protests, when she was booked again. This time, SP chief Akhilesh Yadav provided her legal support. Fast forward to 2022. Pooja Shukla—don't miss the surname—is now the party's young-

GOA

BY GOD OR BY LAW

Once bitten by mass defection, the Goa Congress seems twice shy. At one point, it would parade its candidates before sundry gods to swear unswerving loyalty to the party. Now unsure of their godfearing cred, the party is making its candidates submit affidavits declaring they will stay with the Congress, come hell or the BJP. The Aam Aadmi Party is following suit. If it's a hung assembly, they do not want saffronists

MANDAR DEODHAR

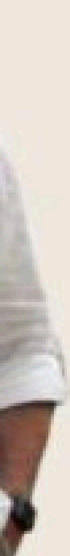
est Brahmin face in the state capital (where, incidentally, Brahmin voters are in significant numbers). She had begun campaigning even before she was officially named a candidate, just days after she turned 25 on January 4. "I have been active in this constituency for the last one year," she told INDIA TODAY. "There's huge anti-incumbency against the present BJP MLA. People want change."

In Rath, Hamirpur, the SP has given a ticket to local girl Chandrawati Varma, a sports enthusiast who used to work as a fitness trainer in Hyderabad just months ago. A video of her dancing with friends on the song *Ole Ole* went viral on social media recently, drawing the same poison darts from BJP supporters as Archana Gautam, the Congress candidate in Hastinapur, after her bikini pics were posted online. The SP stood by Varma, calling it her personal affair.

The BSP showed signs of catching the infection when it appointed Seema Kushwaha, a Supreme Court lawyer who represented the victims in the Nirbhaya and Hathras rape cases, as a national spokesperson.

In neighbouring Uttarakhand, the 'revenge campaign' of two daughters is drawing some attention. In Kotdwar, the BJP's Ritu Khanduri Bhushan is taking on Surendra Singh Negi, the man who defeated her father, former CM B.C. Khanduri, in 2012. And Anupama Rawat is facing off against the BJP's Swami Yatishwaranand in Haridwar (Rural)—the one who proved to be dad Harish Rawat's nemesis in 2017. ■

—with Prashant Srivastava, Anilesh S. Mahajan, Kiran D. Tare and Ashish Misra



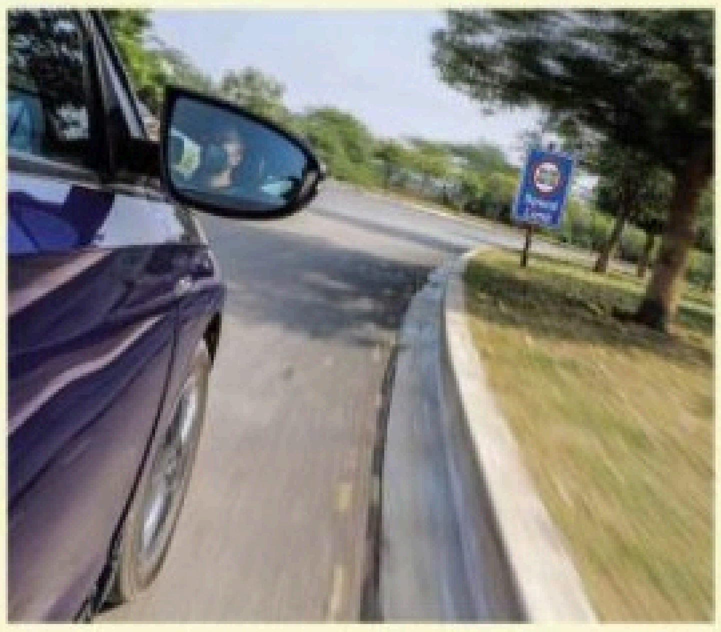
poaching their MLAs. Goa Forward Party (GFP) chief **Vijai Sardesai** is putting his faith in divinity though. He marched his candidates to Mapusa deity Bodageshwar to pledge that they'll never join the BJP in their lifetime. Being an unforgiving sort, Bodageshwar does not take kindly to a broken pledge. Those who dare do so, do not live long. Ergo, long live GFP. ■

#BeTheBetterGuy
A Road Safety Initiative

India Today Group and Hyundai Motor India Foundation with a shared vision have come together to work towards a common goal of making Indian roads safer. The campaign is motivated towards raising civic sense within Indians, communicating road safety concerns to road users and bringing about an organic change in the world's 2nd most populous country.

The driving force behind this campaign is creating awareness about road safety and driving etiquettes. It is the lackadaisical attitude towards these two factors by drivers themselves that causes most accidents.

SAFETY MATTERS



The thrill of speed can be exhilarating, but it's important not to take the consequences of over-speeding lightly. It is imperative that you stick to the speed rules. The fear of getting pulled over and ticketed by speed cameras and interceptor patrol cars is enough to make even the most stubborn driver think twice before they break any laws.

Vehicle knowledge is also an important part of the equation when it comes to preventing speeding. To be a great driver, you need to know how your car handles and accelerates. Learning the optimal braking performance of each individual vehicle is just as important so that when someone messes up or makes an error in judgment while driving, you'll have time enough on hand to act before impact. You need an intuitive grasp on when it's better (or worse) time for you to brake, accelerate or change lanes.

Motoring is a joy and living life in the slow lane should be encouraged. So, next time you hear that chime go off at 80 or 120 kmph, take note of how much fun it can really feel when we're not speeding up.

GONE WITH THE WIND

'Team Rahul Gandhi', the band of young leaders touted as the Congress scion's able lieutenants, lies in disarray. Several of them have quit the party, others sulk openly

BY KAUSHIK DEKA

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

A week after the Congress's humiliating defeat in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, one of the party's young Turks who also happened to have been a minister in both regimes of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), told INDIA TODAY: "Now Pappu will understand what it means to be in politics. It's not easy surviving in the Opposition camp." Pappu, of course, is a derogatory reference to Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, popularised in social media by his detractors.

The comment was later withheld at the leader's request, but it was one of the first indicators of disgruntlement among the younger lot who had come to the fore after Rahul joined politics in 2004. While the Gandhi scion has 'survived'—even helmed the party at one point despite the multiple electoral debacles since that disastrous summer of 2014—several leaders of his generation, including the minister who had made the aforementioned comment, have deserted Rahul and the party.

On January 25, R.P.N Singh became only the latest member of 'Team Rahul' to desert the Congress ship. This ambitious coterie took shape in July 2003 at a three-day *chintan shivir* (brainstorming session) of the Congress in Shimla. At the *shivir*, a Congress general secretary known for his proximity to the Gandhi family, had gone around asking the participants to name young Congressmen who could be groomed as future leaders. On the final day of the session, on July 9, a few names were scribbled on a piece of paper—Sachin Pilot, Jyotiraditya Scindia, Jitin Prasada and R.P.N. Singh. They were expected to work closely with Rahul, and all of them, besides two others—Ajay Maken and Manish Tewari—were given tickets to contest the Lok Sabha election in 2004 in which Rahul too made his debut. Five years later, two more names—Jitendra Singh and Milind Deora—were added to the list made up mostly of scions of political dynasties.

RAHUL NO LONGER RELIES ON THE COUNSEL OF ANY PARTICULAR LEADER AND HAS ADOPTED WHAT ONE LEADER CALLS A HORSES-FOR-COURSES APPROACH

Nearly two decades later, his team—all of whom have served as Union ministers—has disintegrated. Three of them—Scindia, Prasada and RPN—have joined the BJP. Pilot and Deora have expressed discontent on many occasions. Tewari, one of the Group of 23 leaders who had written a letter to Congress president Sonia

THE LOST KINGDOM
A pensive Rahul Gandhi

THE DISINTEGRATION OF TEAM RAHUL

These leaders were often projected in the media as members of the young team the Gandhi scion was building

AJAY MAKEN
Still one of Rahul's most trusted men. Now a CWC member and general secretary in-charge, Rajasthan

SACHIN PILOT
UPA minister and ex-Rajasthan Congress president; now leading the dissent against CM Ashok Gehlot

JITENDRA SINGH
CWC member and general secretary in-charge for Assam. Restricted to his constituency since 2014

MILIND DEORA
The UPA minister has not won an election since 2014; remains disgruntled

MEENAKSHI NATARAJAN
One of Rahul's young picks. Missing since the second Lok Sabha defeat in 2019

EXIT DOORS →

JYOTIRADITYA SCINDIA
A UPA minister, he lost in 2019. Joined the BJP after toppling the Congress government in MP

ASHOK TANWAR
A Rahul favourite, he was Haryana state president; left in 2019, joined the TMC in 2021

R.P.N. SINGH
UPA minister had not won an election since 2014; latest to join the BJP

JITIN PRASADA
A UPA minister, he was one of the G23 dissidents; joined the BJP in 2021

SUSHMITA DEV
Daughter of Santosh Mohan Dev, she was made chief of the party's women wing; joined the TMC in 2021

Gandhi in August 2020 seeking an overhaul of the party organisation and leadership, has not been given any significant assignment despite being a senior leader in the Lok Sabha. Only Maken and Jitendra Singh have shown unwavering commitment to Rahul though they too have not won a single election since 2014.

Apart from the original team, down the years, Rahul also backed several other young men and women, giving them significant roles in the party. A 38-year-old Ashok Tanwar, who was also a former Youth Congress president, was made president of the Haryana Congress. Sushmita Dev, daughter of Gandhi family loyalist and former Union minister Santosh Mohan Dev, was made head of the All India Mahila Congress. Both joined the Trinamool Congress (TMC) last year. Though none of the breakaway leaders has publicly uttered a word against Rahul, sources attribute their disillusionment to the latter's leadership style and the failure of the party to come up with a narrative that can attract voters.

Privately, many complain that the Congress leader can be 'flighty', periodically changing his advisors and promoting a new coterie while others fall off the radar. Also, once he turns his back on someone, it becomes very difficult to get an audience again. After losing patience, and trust, with many, Rahul now doesn't rely on the counsel of any particular leader and has adopted what one leader describes as a horses-for-courses approach. "This is making his decisions seem more random. One day he is consulting Jairam Ramesh, the next K.C. Venugopal. A party decision can even be made after a casual conversation with someone from another party, like CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury. This is making his own leaders restless," says a CWC (Congress Working Committee) member.

Rahul's supporters dismiss such criticism and claim "the deserters" moved because they couldn't even protect their own constituencies. "The

ROLL CALL OF COUNSELLORS

Rahul Gandhi has sought the advice of these leaders at different phases of his political career

DIGVIJAYA SINGH (2007-2012)
The ex-MP CM was seen as Rahul's 'guru'; lost influence after the 2012 UP assembly poll loss

JAIRAM RAMESH (2008-2014)
Still consulted on policy matters but doesn't have the influence he had before 2014

MOHAN PRAKASH (2009-2015)
The Rajasthan socialist was a guide on UP politics; now back as the observer for Uttarakhand polls

C.P. JOSHI (2012-2017)
Key poll strategist. Mishandling of the northeastern states, which he oversaw, cost him proximity to Rahul

MADHUSUDAN MISTRY (2013-'17)
Good at data-crunching but failed to deliver on the ground. Currently head of the party's Central Election Authority

ASHOK GEHLOT (2017-2018)
As organisational secretary, he got close to the Gandhi scion, who picked him as the Rajasthan CM over Sachin Pilot

party continued to give tickets and whatever else they wanted to these leaders. Rahul and Priyanka campaigned for some of them too. But they spent little time on party work in their constituencies, so they kept losing. How can Rahul be blamed for this?" asks a Lok Sabha MP from the party. While Scindia and Sushmita won the 2014 Lok Sabha poll, they lost in 2019. Prasada, Tanwar and Jitendra Singh have been losing since 2014.

Several Congress leaders even claim that the perception that these leaders were close to Rahul was a "carefully cultivated PR exercise". They were seen moving around with him in Parliament around the same time he became a Lok Sabha member for the first time, and he interacted more with them because they were his contemporaries. "As a leader, Rahul is very affectionate towards his colleagues. Many among us misunderstand it as a passport to get the positions we aspire for. But when it comes to party and organisation, he keeps the larger interest in mind and doesn't practise favouritism. Then the so-called friends get upset and blame him for their inability to deliver," says Lok Sabha MP and Congress CWC member Manickam Tagore.

Besides the shrinking electoral capital, what troubled these former friends was the gradual sidelining within the party organisation. The party's de facto leader apparently also did not intervene to protect their "valid concerns". In 2018, Rahul chose veteran Kamal Nath over Scindia as the chief ministerial choice for Madhya Pradesh. In Uttar Pradesh, Prasada sought to position himself as a Brahmin leader. But when Priyanka Gandhi became general secretary in-charge of UP, he found he had no role in her scheme of things. Former royal and Kurmi leader R.P.N. Singh was involved in a turf war with state Congress president Ajay Kumar Lallu whose assembly constituency Tamkuhi Raj falls within Kushi Nagar, the Lok Sabha constituency RPN contests from. Lallu, incidentally, is a close confidant of Priyanka.

Tanwar was upset because he was removed as Haryana Congress president in 2019. Rahul also did little to protect him against state satraps such as former chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda, who had allegedly made things difficult for Tanwar. But, as a Congress MP from Haryana asks, "Why does he blame others when he could not win his own seat twice?"

Many within the party admit that Sushmita Dev's departure was necessitated by the changing sociopolitical scenario in Assam's Barak Valley where her constituency, Silchar, falls. The Barak Valley is dominated by Bangla-speaking Hindus and Muslim. Most of the immigrant Hindus support the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, but the Congress is against it. Though Sushmita took a separate stand from the Congress on the issue, this was not enough to convince the Hindu vote bank. Weighing her options, she chose to join the TMC, which is wooing voters as a party for the Bangla-speaking population in Assam, irrespective of their religion.

Congress insiders say unlike Scindia, who was instrumental in dethroning the Congress government in MP, the other turncoats will not cause any significant damage to the party. Scindia and Sushmita have taken the Rajya Sabha route to Parliament while Prasada entered the upper house of the UP legislature. RPN and Tanwar are still undecided on their future course of action. But the desertions have caused a big dent in the political brand equity of Rahul Gandhi as these leaders were perceived to be close to him.

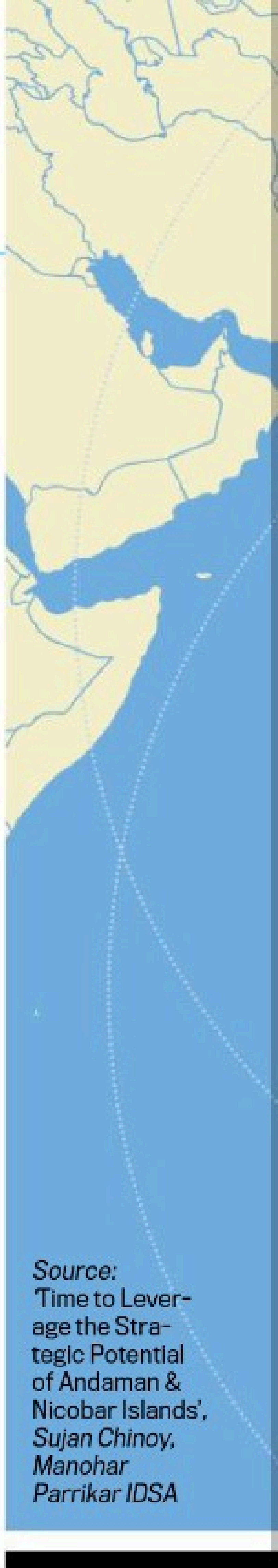
The redemption will now depend on his latest gamble—selecting Charanjit Singh Channi as the Congress CM candidate for Punjab and ignoring the mercurial Navjot Singh Sidhu. Just months ago, Sidhu was the chosen soldier of Rahul and Priyanka in their plan to neutralise former chief minister Amarinder Singh. The results of the Punjab assembly election will determine whether this new move was a masterstroke or another dud by the perennial prince of the party. ■

> **THE DESERTIONS HAVE NOT AFFECTED THE PARTY MUCH BUT THEY HAVE CAUSED A BIG DENT IN THE POLITICAL BRAND EQUITY OF RAHUL GANDHI**

NEGLECTED BASTIONS

CAN THE ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS BECOME THE FOCUS OF INDIA'S MILITARY STRATEGY AGAINST A BELLIGERENT CHINA? THERE IS PLENTY OF INTENT, BUT INSUFFICIENT MILITARY CAPACITY ON THE GROUND

By Sandeep Unnithan

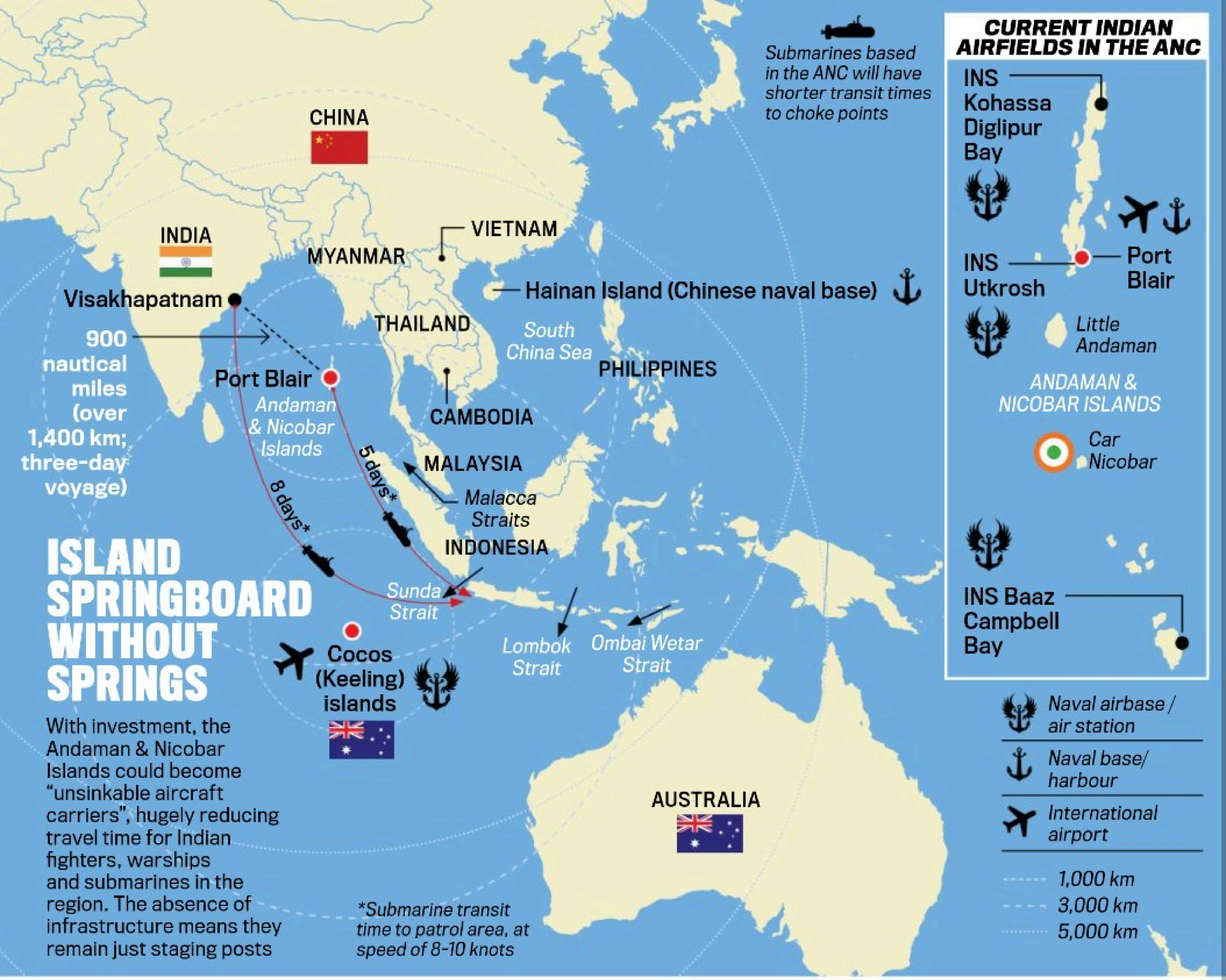


Source: 'Time to Leverage the Strategic Potential of Andaman & Nicobar Islands', *Sujan Chinoy, Manohar Parrikar IDSA*

FROM HIGH ABOVE, Teressa Island resembles a giant green boomerang, frozen mid-throw over an azure sea. Last December, this island in the Nicobar chain was a military objective for over 100 soldiers from an elite army unit. Leaping out of the back of a C-130J transport, paratroopers from the Agra-based Shatrujeet Brigade practised parachuting onto the island and securing a drop zone, simulating how India would react to an invasion of the islands. In a real-world scenario, it would be the entire 3,000-man brigade parachuting and airlanding to capture key installations like airfields before a larger friendly seaborne force arrived. The brigade's emblem, a winged centaur drawing a bow, symbolises its composite capabilities. It has seen action in all of independent India's conflicts—two successes in the modern era involved an operation behind enemy lines in erstwhile East Pakistan in 1971 and thwarting a coup in the Maldives in 1989.

The last time the Andaman & Nicobar (A&N) Islands were invaded was 80 years ago, in 1942, when the Imperial Japanese Navy—then the most powerful naval force in Asia—drove out the British and occupied the archipelago. In recent years, the PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy) has mimicked the rise of the Japanese navy, growing at an astonishing speed. In 2021, it added more submarines, destroyers and amphibious assault ships to its fleet than all the warships in the Vizag-based Eastern Naval Command. This means it can continue to deploy an increasing number of warships in the Indian Ocean region, as it has done over the past decade. It also has bases in Gwadar in Pakistan and Djibouti on the horn of Africa. A strong naval force helps China project power and overcome what is called 'Beijing's Malacca dilemma'—of 65 per cent of its oil imports transiting through the narrow Malacca Straits.

China's rise, and this possible maritime vulnerability, have prompted New Delhi to look more closely at the


Submarines based in the ANC will have shorter transit times to choke points
CURRENT INDIAN AIRFIELDS IN THE ANC
INS Kohassa Diglipur Bay
INS Utkrosh
Port Blair
Little Andaman
ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS
Car Nicobar
INS Baaz Campbell Bay
Naval airbase / air station
Naval base/ harbour
International airport
1,000 km
3,000 km
5,000 km
CHINA
INDIA
MYANMAR
VIETNAM
Hainan Island (Chinese naval base)
Visakhapatnam
900 nautical miles (over 1,400 km; three-day voyage)
THAILAND
South China Sea
PHILIPPINES
Port Blair
Andaman & Nicobar Islands
CAMBODIA
MALAYSIA
5 days*
8 days*
Malacca Straits
INDONESIA
Sunda Strait
Lombok Strait
Ombai Wetar Strait
Cocos (Keeling) islands
AUSTRALIA
*Submarine transit time to patrol area, at speed of 8-10 knots

ISLAND SPRINGBOARD WITHOUT SPRINGS

With investment, the Andaman & Nicobar Islands could become "unsinkable aircraft carriers", hugely reducing travel time for Indian fighters, warships and submarines in the region. The absence of infrastructure means they remain just staging posts

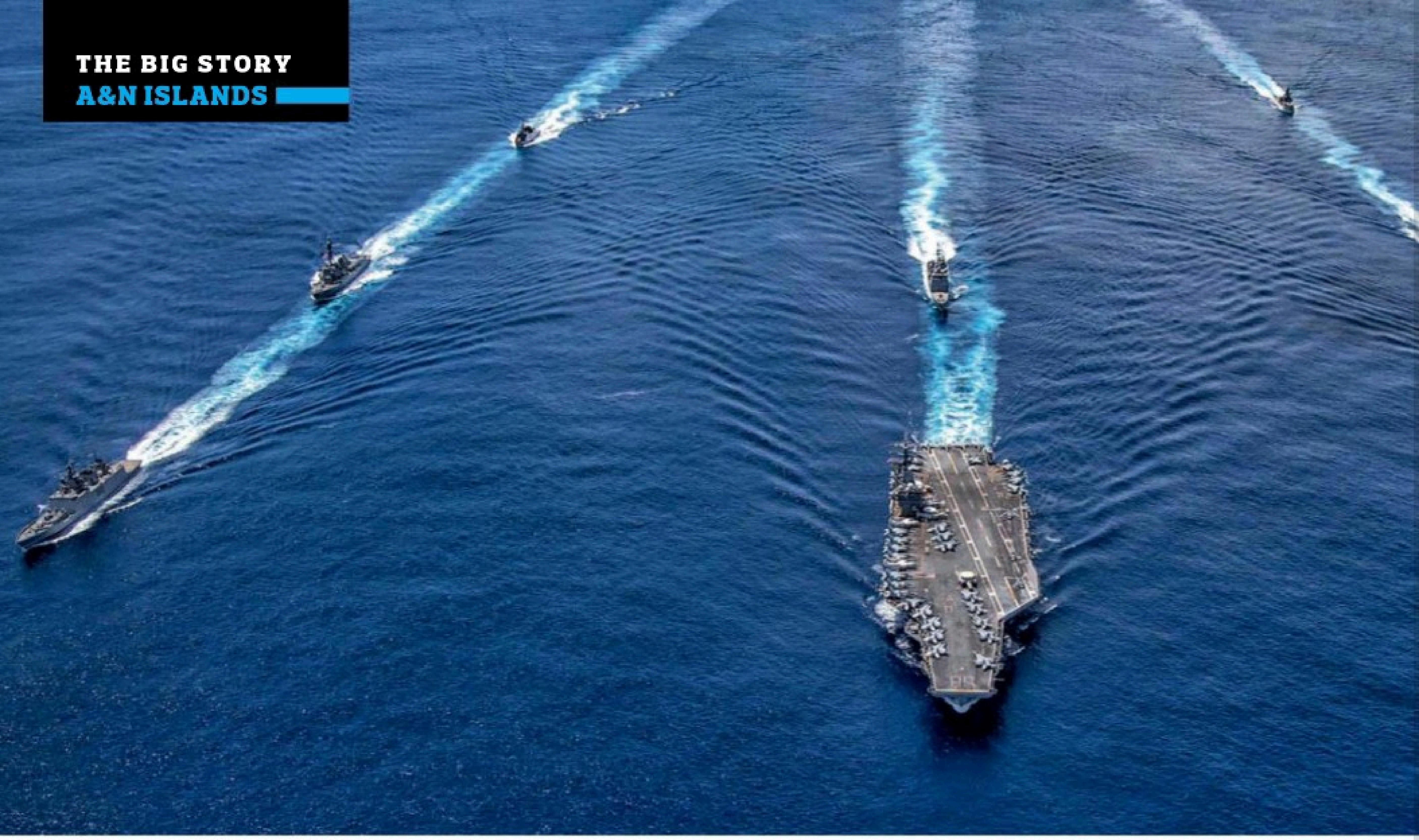
potential of its island outposts to act on that vulnerability. The 572 islands in the A&N chain, of which only 32 are inhabited, constitute an area larger than the state of Sikkim. The group sits 1,400 km from the Indian mainland—closer, in fact, to Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand than India itself.

In a report tabled in Parliament last December, the parliamentary standing committee on defence recommended that the islands be developed into 'aircraft carriers' of a kind. The islands, the committee said, were well suited to 'blocking and dominating ingress routes [into the Indian Ocean], provided runways there are made operational'. The archipelago is close to three critical chokepoints—the Ombai Wetar, Lombok and Sunda straits—through which the PLAN can enter the Indian Ocean. Aircraft based on the islands would have shorter flight times to these choke points than from the Indian mainland, and submarines based from here can reach in five days instead of eight, meaning they could spend more time patrolling. Currently, India is seeking basing rights for its P-8I anti-submarine warfare aircraft on Australia's Keeling Islands, also located near these points.

China is using islands bristling with missiles, airfields and docks to dominate the South China Sea. The plan is for India to do the same with Andaman & Nicobar

The A&N Islands currently have four airstrips, which host a handful of IAF helicopters, naval and coast guard surveillance helicopters and drones. A few patrol ships belonging to the navy and coast guard also operate in these waters. The IAF only occasionally bases fighter aircraft here—the islands are seen more as forward operating bases than full-strength military installations. The late Chief of Defence Staff General

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY



Bipin Rawat had described the islands as "unsinkable aircraft carriers"; in an October 2021 interview with INDIA TODAY, he said fighters operating from the islands had none of the vulnerabilities of aircraft carriers, which were expensive, vulnerable to detection and could be targeted by an adversary. (The concept of an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier' originated in World War II, when the US built up a series of island airbases in the Pacific to target mainland Japan.)

This view is echoed by military analyst Rear Admiral Raja Menon, who recommends the islands be made the fulcrum of India's strategy to counter China's maritime buildup and offset Beijing's overland pressure on New Delhi. In an independent paper submitted to the government last month, he writes that upgraded Chinese infrastructure in Tibet—from expressways to bullet trains—allows the PLA to swiftly move around smaller overall numbers of acclimatised troops, giving it the ability to overwhelm Indian forces at any point along the boundary. Creating an 'eastern battlespace' at the Malacca Straits would give India offensive options at sea, allowing the country to throttle Chinese maritime commerce and force incoming PLA naval units through a choke point where they could be targeted.

In recent years, contingency planning like this has been going on in several countries threatened by the rise of a belligerent China. In September 2021 the US, UK and Australia announced a trilateral security pact—AUKUS—to act as a force multiplier in the Indo-Pacific. On September 24, US president Joe Biden hosted the first in-person security dialogue of the Quad Leaders' Summit in the White House, hosting PM Narendra Modi, Japan PM Yoshihide Suga and Australia PM Scott Morrison.

Emphasising the strategic location of the A&N Islands, Sujan Chinoy, director general of the MP-IDSA (Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses) recommends opening them up to the Quad's navies. In a June 2020 paper, he also noted that a 'combination of economic and strategic factors has significantly enhanced the strategic salience of the Bay of Bengal and its littorals'. "The A&N Islands are at the intersection of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, and further to the Pacific Ocean, an important fulcrum of the strategic concept of the Indo-Pacific," he says.

A SLOW AWAKENING

The strategic potential of the A&N Islands has been known for decades. They flank the Bay of Bengal, where India's growing fleet of ballistic missile-carrying nuclear powered submarines (SSBNs) operates from. The Andaman Sea is a sanctuary from where Indian SSBNs can target both its nuclear-armed adversaries in a retaliatory second-strike. In the late 1990s, navy chief Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat had called for an upgrade of the region's command and control system, for Fortress Andaman to be converted into a Far Eastern Command, led by a navy flag officer with deputies from the army and air force. However, the proposal was shelved, and in 2001, the island was put under India's only tri-services command—the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC). It is a tiny version of what the defence ministry hopes to reorganise India's armed forces into—five integrated theatre commands

WAR GAME Indian Navy ships conduct an exercise with America's USS Nimitz carrier strike group near the Andaman & Nicobar Islands in July 2020

Turning the A&N Islands into unsinkable aircraft carriers will require tens of thousands of crores for radars, missiles, airfields, docks and more

reporting to a single CDS. However, the islands are thinly defended, with few radars or surface to air missile launchers and poor infrastructure.

India's military use of the A&N Islands is a study in contrast to what other great powers have done. The US base on Diego Garcia, an island fortress in the Indian Ocean just south of the Equator, has a 3.6 km runway, bases ships and can launch heavy bombers across Asia. Over the past decade, China has dumped millions of acres of sand onto reefs in the South China Sea to build several mini Diego Garcias—small patches of reclaimed land bristling with missile sites, airfields and docking facilities—and has been using them to reinforce its claim over the entire South China Sea.

In the past five years, New Delhi has been pushing to realise the economic potential of the A&N Islands. They straddle critical sea routes in southeast and east Asia—these include Duncan's Passage, the Ten Degree channel, the Preparis and the Six Degree channel. In 2017, Rs 10,000 crore worth of potential development projects were identified. The government says it has added over 100 km of roads on these islands between 2014 and 2018. Inaugurating the first submarine optic cable to the islands in 2020, PM Modi said they would be the fulcrum of India's blue ocean strategy.

However, building military infrastructure on the islands, over a thousand kilometres from the Indian mainland, will not be easy. Creating "unsinkable aircraft carriers" requires massive investment and several years of sustained infrastructure development. It will need tens of thousands of crores for radars and missiles, maintenance and repair facilities, runways for permanently-based fighters and long range maritime patrol aircraft, coastal defence missiles and more dock berths for warships, patrol craft and submarines.

In early 2014, when the Indian Navy deployed long-range patrol aircraft to search for MH370, the Malaysia Airlines flight that went missing that year, it found its sorties limited by the fuel supplies on the island. The tri-services command, which war-gamed military operations from the island, found glaring logistics and infrastructure shortfalls. Most vulnerabilities remain classified, but can be inferred as including limited quantities of fuel for aircraft and warships. The Su-30MKI, a heavy fighter with a range of 3,000 km, is an ideal fighter to be based on the islands. Each Su-30MKI, however, needs 12,000 litres of aviation fuel for a four-hour sortie. Both Port Blair and Car Nicobar lack twin runways (to ensure redundancy in case one is disabled). A new IAF airfield to operate fighter aircraft on the southernmost island, Great Nicobar, is yet to materialise. Since military deployments are not only about presence but also about sustenance, the armed forces will have to build large underground fuel storage tanks that will allow fighter jets to conduct more combat sorties. Freshwater desalination plants will also be needed to supply the increase in personnel. "One-off interventions from the mainland apart, the question remains—can we maintain and operate Su-30s from the Andaman Islands for prolonged deployments?" asks a retired admiral who did not want to be named. Issues like these mean the islands remain peacetime staging posts rather than permanent bases. US military historian Edward Luttwak recommends India leverage the potential of shore-based aircraft rather than aircraft carriers that are WWII relics. Delivering the MP-IDSA's annual K. Subrahmanyam memorial lecture on February 3, he said: "The Indian Navy spends all its money on an aircraft carrier—when I look at the map, India is an aircraft carrier. The navy should be empowered to buy aircraft all along India, the Andaman & Nicobar Islands... and dominate the entry to the Persian Gulf, the Suez Canal, the Straits of Malacca with multiple missiles and aircraft that cost about the [same as] a single aircraft carrier, which is vulnerable and has a limited number of combat aircraft."

"There are infrastructure issues, but they can be addressed, " says defence analyst Rear Admiral Sudarshan Shrikhande. "Mobile batteries like Brahmos would be very useful and less vulnerable. The islands would be useful for their dispersed air and missile launch potential as well as for Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR). There may be new complications, as there have always been for any epoch of warfare." While the existing issues will take time to solve, the larger question of whether the A&N Islands can become significant military bases within this decade remains yet unanswered. ■

TORONTO CALLING

A THIRD CHEAPER THAN THEIR US COUNTERPARTS AND WITH A MUCH MORE FLEXIBLE WORK PERMIT PROGRAMME, CANADIAN COLLEGES ARE BECOMING THE NEW DESTINATION FOR INDIAN STUDENTS

By Indira Kannan in Toronto

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS Indian students at the Sheridan College campus in Brampton

Photo Courtesy SHERIDAN COLLEGE

Growing up in Talwandi Salem village of Punjab's Jalandhar district, Amanpreet Kaur, 20, was eager to learn about the workings of the brain. Between attending school in nearby Nakodar, helping out at her family's grocery store and flour mill, and devouring the Goosebumps books by R.L. Stine, the science student would read up on social stigmas attached to mental health. After Class 12, Kaur didn't think twice about heading to Canada for further studies, especially since her elder brother was already there. "Canada...that seemed an easy road to take," Kaur says. "If you're planning to study something in India, especially in the medical field, it takes a lot out of you. You have to clear the entrance examination, you have to pick a nice college that exposes you to a better programme of study and stuff... you see a lot of struggle and difficulty and then you just assume there's no future after that, right?"

The post-secondary diploma course in mental health and addiction at Fleming College in the town of Peterborough, about 140 km northeast of Toronto, seemed like the perfect fit and so, two years ago, Kaur joined the steadily growing number of Indian students heading to Canada. Having graduated in May 2021, she is now working in a field that had always interested her, with dreams of studying further to become a psychiatrist.

Thousands more like Kaur are now heading to Canada for various reasons, including costs and ease of immigration. Last year, Canada issued a record 148,300 visas to Indian students, as against 62,000 by the United States through October. Ravi Jain, a partner at the Toronto immigration law firm Green and Spiegel, notes, "Australia is seen as more isolated. And the US is less attractive given the racial tensions and the reality that it's very difficult to obtain a green card down the road. In Canada, a lot of the agents are really promising permanent residence, though it's not quite that easy."

Six years ago, China was the top source country for international students in Canada, sending twice as many students as India. By 2017, India had caught up, and after a brief dip due to Covid-19, bagged well over a third of the 397,210 study permits issued last year (*see box*).

This surge has drawn to India companies like ApplyBoard, a platform connecting students and recruitment partners to global educational institutions. The Canadian company opened a new office in Gurugram in October, and a third of its 1,500-strong workforce is in India. Co-founder and CEO Martin Basiri says, "I think we'll become 20-30 times bigger in India."

In fact, Indian families have been more or less funding higher education in many parts of Canada over the past few years. In Ontario, Canada's most populous province, public colleges now earn Canadian $1.7 billion, or 68 per cent of their tuition revenue, from international students, of which nearly two-thirds are from India. According to the latest figures by the Canadian government, international students contributed over Canadian $22 billion to the nation's economy in 2018.

Nearly two-thirds of Indian students in Canada choose courses related to business, science and computing, and nearly three-quarters choose the job market-oriented colleges over universities. The US is home to far more top-ranked universities than Canada, but it's common knowledge that many students view the education credential more as a pathway to eventual immigration.

Canada's Post-Graduate Work Permit (PGWP) programme is more liberal than the Optional Practical Training (OPT), its American counterpart. While the OPT gives graduates 12 months—and an extra two years to STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) graduates—to stay on in the US and find a job (but only in their field of study), the PGWP holder can stay in Canada for up to three years and work with any employer.

Canada has also been steadily increasing its immigration targets, hoping to welcome over 410,000 immigrants next year. Students graduating from Canadian institutions and having Canadian work experience will be part of this cohort, making a Canadian education even more attractive to aspiring immigrants. On the other hand, the H1B work visa in the US is subject to periodic political pressures, and the wait for a green card, especially for Indian-born applicants, can often take a decade or more.

On the cost front, while international students pay 4-5 times higher tuition than domestic students in Canada, it's still about a third cheaper than the US. Kaur, for instance, paid over Canadian $32,000 (nearly Rs 19 lakh) for her four-semester course at Fleming College, Peterborough, Ontario.

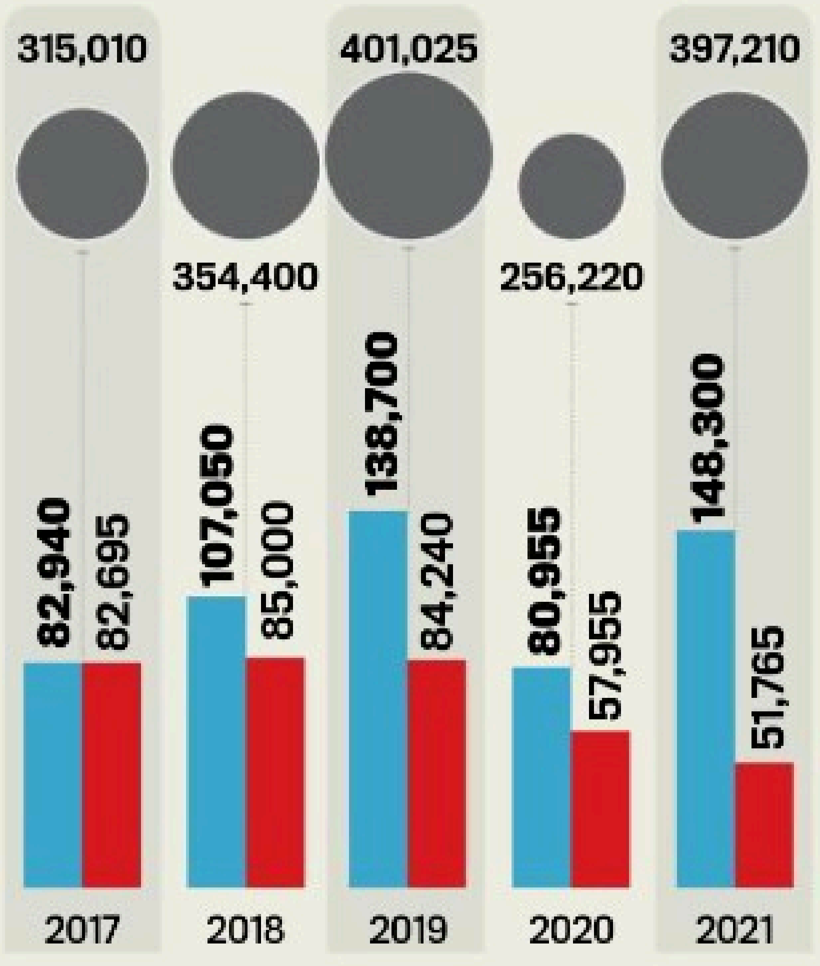
However, the jump in the numbers of Indian students in Canada is also starting to ring alarm bells in some quarters. For Gurpreet S. Malhotra, CEO of Indus Community Services, the problems are glaring. "Landlords have up to 20 young people in a three-bedroom home," he says. "In order to survive, students are often working under the table for less than minimum wage. We have seen increase in Indian student suicides...as well as criminal activities taking advantage of these young people for transporting drugs and human trafficking. And it all starts with consultants in India paid to do this marketing to bring people over." Jain adds that "it's the responsibility of the federal government to regulate agents and consultants, and they're not regulating them properly". Anupma Cvejic, co-founder of Sunoh, another community group, has been conducting webinars for students in India, detailing the challenges they can expect to face in Canada.

Sheridan College, a public college in Brampton, near Toronto, has long been a popular destination for students from India. However, concerned about the limited social infrastructure that was available to support these students, it started slowing its international student intake three years ago, at a time when many Ontario colleges were ramping up recruitment, especially from India.

Study permits issued in 2021 show that it has been another record-setting year for Indian students heading to Canada. According to their well-wishers, however, the students' real education needs to start before they embark on their journey to a land over 11,000 kilometres away. ■

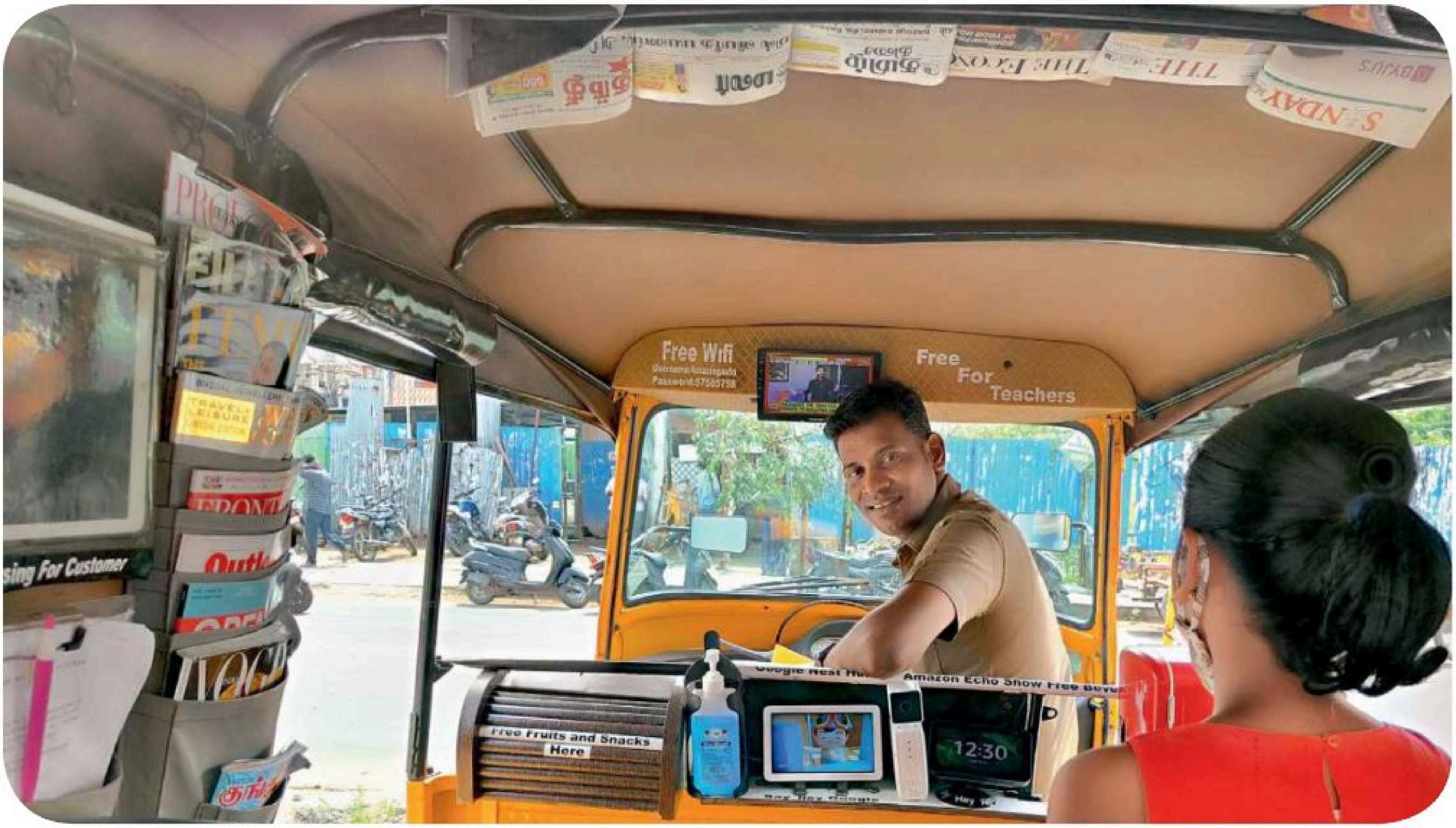
A GROWING INDIAN PRESENCE

Study permits granted by Canada



Country of origin ■ India ■ China ● Total

(Source: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada)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S. INIYAN

An Auto Driver's *Lessons in Customer Care*

His pride in his job has brought Annadurai to the notice of business titans

By **T.V.S. SOMU**

Annadurai, a 38-year-old auto driver in Chennai, recently shot to national fame for taking public transport to a whole new level. Big corporate houses have invited him to speak to their employees about business management, and many top executives have showered him with praise. Anand Mahindra tweeted: 'If MBA students spent a day with [Annadurai], it would be a compressed course in customer experience management. This man's not only an auto driver... he's a professor of management.' Recently, Annadurai was even called upon by the DGP (director general of police) of Tamil Nadu, Dr C. Sylendra Babu, who presented him with a certificate of recognition.

A resident of Chennai's Injambakkam, Annadurai decided that he wanted to make travelling an especially pleasant experience for his customers. In his auto, passengers have access to several daily newspapers and weekly magazines and the vehicle is also equipped with a small smart TV, free WiFi and a fridge in which ice-cold water and juices are available. There also has a jar with fruits, chocolate and chips for travellers to snack on. Annadurai has also equipped his auto with digital tools to give passengers a sense of the traffic ahead on their journey.

What's more, he provides all these services for free. "I want to make the trip enjoyable and useful for passengers," says Annadurai. He also makes an extra effort for those with disabilities—for example, he has installed a sign language tool for those who cannot hear. He also keeps five or six umbrellas in the auto to give to passengers in case of a sudden shower, which can be returned on their next ride with him. He says he has no worries about passengers cheating him by not returning the item. He has also set up a system for feedback, and says he

HAPPINESS MANTRA

> ***"I sincerely love this career. I thought it would be nice to put in some utilities for customers"***
>
> **— ANNADURAI**

gives rewards for the best suggestions. "There is a sheet, a pen and a pad in the auto, with five questions for me to understand my customers' opinion of my services. All you have to do is tick the boxes and write your email address. I select the best feedback and give them a prize of Rs 1,000 out of my income," says Annadurai enthusiastically.

So, who is this uniquely pleasant individual? "My hometown is Rettavayal village near Peravurani, in Thanjavur district," says Annadurai. "My dad, Ganesan, is a culinary expert. My mother, Amsavalli, is a housewife. My family came to Chennai 38 years ago—that was when my dad started driving an auto. I have studied till 12th standard. My parents supported me well with my education, but I wanted something else. It has been 12 years since I started driving my dad's auto," he sums up his history simply. How did he come up with the idea of being different? Annadurai smiles. "I sincerely love this career. I thought it would be nice to put in some utilities and facilities for customers who travel in my auto. I want to make their trip a pleasant one." Being tech-savvy, Annadurai also started accepting payments via credit and debit cards well before cashless transactions became popular.

His innovative way of functioning has taken him right to the top. He has given talks at conferences held by the likes of Google and Microsoft, and was also invited to attend a meeting in Delhi in 2020, attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and several Union ministers. Annadurai's different style of operating arises from his understanding of passengers' expectations. "All they want is a sense of security and respect [on their journey]. Our appearance is also important. I shave daily and stay clean. I always wear my uniform when attending to my passengers," he explains.

Apart from customer-centric innovations, Annadurai also offers altruistic services—for example, offering free rides to teachers, doctors, cleaners and nurses. He doesn't take payment from children and women travelling on Children's Day and Women's Day, respectively, and does not charge extra for the amenities in his vehicle, only the fee fixed by the government. "Everyone has a money problem, but isn't it wrong to think of taking money from another's pocket? I do not focus on money. Customers will come back if we are true to our business with integrity." ■

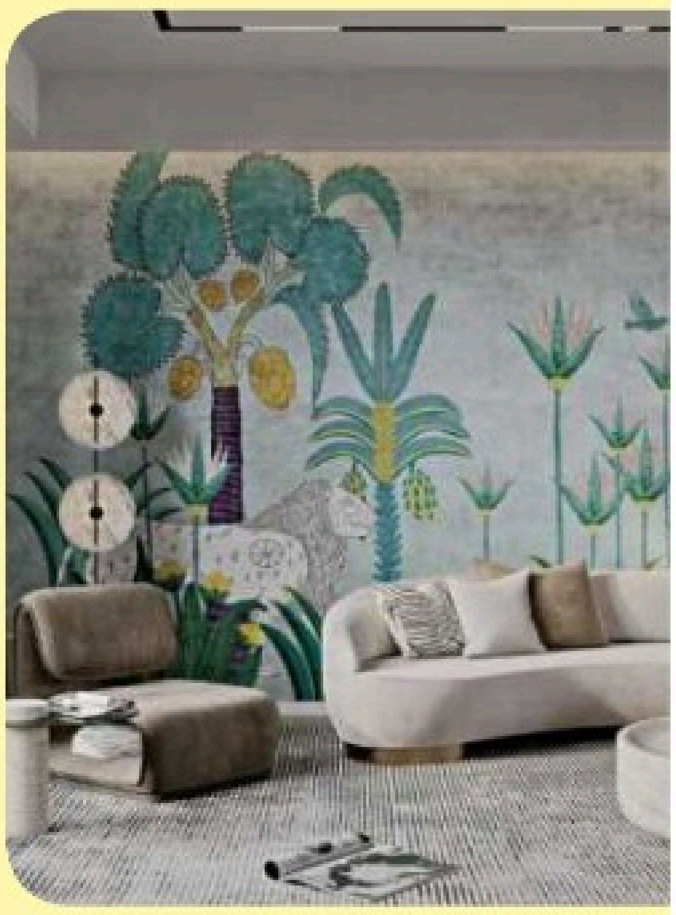
Happiness Quest: *A joint enterprise of India Today and the RPG Group celebrating exemplary initiatives to spread happiness*

COLOUR ME *Happy*

The right shade can elevate your mood and bring positivity and serenity to your home

By **RIDHI KALE**

From pastels to millennial pinks and from fuchsia to teal, the hue you pick can not only determine the look of your home but also have a huge impact on your mood. Here's what the experts say.



SEEING RED?

"Red is often associated with boldness and a sense of power. The colour is also believed to carry good luck and warmth into a living space," says Suparna Handa, managing director at Sarita Handa, a luxury and lifestyle brand. "It stimulates passion and sensitivity." Use this hue on cushions or bedspreads to add a pop of colour and brightness to your space.

TWO TONES BETTER THAN ONE

"In this doom-and-gloom environment, everyone craves positivity. Here, colour plays an important role—it is one of the easiest ways to get positivity into your home," says Nikita Bansal, head of lighting design at Orange Tree. She says a combination of white and blue can do the trick. "White is the synthesis of all colours, which symbolises neutrality, purity and cleanliness. Blue is all about serenity and calmness. It reduces tension and stress." This combination works very well for ambient lighting, where the play of light and shadow brings added drama.

SAY HELLO TO YELLOW

When selecting colours, think about the vibe you want. "Yellow is like sunshine. It relates to joy, optimism and energy. Whether gold, mustard, lemon or canary yellow, the hue is unmistakably vibrant," says Avani Juneja, co-founder and creative director of Beyond Dreams, a furnishings studio. Playful shades are perfect for children's bedrooms and nurseries; deep tones make a kitchen come to life. "Life gets a little sunny with a ray of yellow as upholstery accents in a dark room. Statement furniture and accessories make for beautiful styling," says Juneja.

LET THE WALLS SHINE

"Vibrant hues and floral motifs can create positive energy in living spaces," says Neha Jain, co-founder of UDC Homes, a company that specialises in wallpapers. "The most refreshing colours are blue and green. The influence they have on wallpaper design is stunning." Green is a symbol of freshness, prosperity and nature. "Incorporating nature-inspired themes on wallpaper designs in different shades of green has a calming effect on the mind. On the other hand, blue symbolises wisdom and serenity, and when used on the walls, this colour can create great harmony."

SOUTH SIDE STORY

BOLLYWOOD REMAKES OF SOUTH INDIAN FILMS HAVE LONG BEEN A TREND. NOW, THE MULTI-GENRE ENTERTAINERS FROM THE SOUTH ARE CHALLENGING HINDI FILMS ON THEIR OWN TURF

By SUHANI SINGH

THE BIG CHEESE
Telugu film star Allu Arjun in *Pushpa: The Rise - Part 1*

"THE WORLD OF HINDI FILMMAKERS CENTRES AROUND ANDHERI AND BANDRA. THEY WATCH ENGLISH FILMS AND NETFLIX AND THINK THAT'S MOVIEMAKING. IT ISN'T"

MANISH SHAH
Director & Chairman, Goldmines Telefilms

Manish Shah, director and chairman of Goldmines Telefilms, a production house, knew he had an ace up his sleeve when he acquired the Hindi rights—satellite, digital and theatrical—to Telugu film *Pushpa: The Rise - Part 1*. The seeds of *Pushpa's* success, he says, were sown seven years ago. The Mumbai-based producer had noticed how the Hindi-dubbed versions of Tamil and Telugu films were doing well on TV channels like Star Gold and Sony Max. He also noticed the growing popularity of Allu Arjun on digital—it was evident on Goldmines Films' YouTube channel, where the Telugu star's films had cumulatively amassed 1.2 billion views. The theatrical success of *Pushpa's* Hindi-dubbed version—which has entered the Rs 100 crore club—was inevitable.

Shah, who has been acquiring 'South films' for satellite release for 14 years now, also attributes *Pushpa's* pan-India success in part to Hindi cinema's failure to entertain audiences. "*Mass action film hum Hindi mein bana hi nahin rahe* [we just aren't making mass action films in Hindi]," he bemoans. One Rohit Shetty film isn't enough, he says, and Salman Khan's films lack "content". "Action is not simply about having a hero beat 10 people up. It needs to be entertaining, have good dialogue and songs." Tamil and Telugu filmmakers offer "more action and scale", while Hindi filmmakers, he feels, are alienating audiences outside the metros. "Hindi film directors stay between Andheri and Bandra [suburbs in Mumbai] and for them the world revolves around these areas," he quips. "They have grown up watching English films and Netflix and they think that is moviemaking. That's not so."

With cinema halls in Maharashtra, a key market, shut for six months in 2021, producers in Mumbai either chose to hold their films' release or took the OTT route. The *Ormax Box Office Report 2020-21* recorded cumulative revenue across 2020 and 2021 down to Rs 5,757 crore, from Rs 11,000 crore in 2019 alone. Meanwhile, cinemas in Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh were closed for a shorter period and 2021 saw a steady supply of films. As a result, Telugu and Tamil films grossed an estimated Rs 1,300 crore and Rs 700 crore annually, respectively, and had a 29 per cent and 17 per cent share of the box office, respectively, in 2020-2021, compared to Hindi cinema, whose share declined from 44 per cent to 27 per cent. "The cumulative share of the four southern film industries went up from 36 per cent in 2019 to 59 per cent in 2020 and 2021, highlighting how they managed to navigate the pandemic with relatively more success than Hindi films," says Gautam Jain, partner, Ormax Media.

The new year is unlikely to be a cakewalk for Hindi films either. S.S. Rajamouli's magnum opus *RRR*, part two of the Kannada film *KGF* and Prabhas's *Radhe Shyam* are some of the films vying for nationwide reach. Shah himself hopes to release another Telugu film—Mahesh Babu's *Sarkaru Vaari Paata*.

Over the past two years, with OTT's rise in popularity, cinema from the South has asserted itself. Both Amazon Prime and Netflix released a steady flow of Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam films with subtitles and, in some cases, dubbed versions in Hindi.

REMAKE EXPRESS

Filmmakers in Mumbai have been turning to the South for inspiration since the 1970s, which has contributed to the success of actors like Jeetendra, Mithun Chakraborty, Anil Kapoor, Govinda, Salman Khan, Ajay Devgn and Akshay Kumar. But this trend has revved up in the past few years. Shahid Kapoor saw his fortunes rise with *Kabir Singh*, a remake of the Telugu film *Arjun Reddy*. His next, *Jersey*, too, is a remake of a Telugu film.

Over the next few years, Bollywood is looking to remake around 24 Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam films, some featuring stars like Akshay Kumar (*Driving Licence*, Malayalam) and Salman Khan (*Master*, Tamil). There is good reason to redo them too, since they are “unabashed and unapologetic, multi-genre entertainers with little bit of comedy, action, drama and family emotion”, says cinema owner and exhibitor Akshaye Rathi. “In Hindi we have, more often than not, started making single-genre films...[and] the emotion and storytelling device has become too urban and niche.”

This time around, there is also a concerted effort by the Hindi industry to go beyond the usual formula. Applause Entertainment is revisiting critically acclaimed Tamil film *Aruvi*, while Aanand L. Rai has produced *Good Luck Jerry*, which relocates the Nayanthara-starrer *Kolamaavu Kokila* to Punjab with Janhvi Kapoor in the lead. Vikram Malhotra, founder and CEO of Abundantia Entertainment, has bought the rights to not just *Soorarai Pottru* (Tamil), the most watched film on Amazon Prime in 2020, but also two acclaimed Malayalam films—*Angamaly Diaries* and *#Home*. “Good films will always find adaptations because they have the ability to connect with a universal audience without losing their emotional relevance,” says Malhotra. He finds that the creators in the South are “more willing to put themselves out there and back their conviction” and, especially in Malayalam cinema, “the risk-taking ability is higher, therefore the ability to create fresher concepts and disruptive stories is higher”.

VIKRAM VEDHA
Saif Ali Khan and Hrithik Roshan team up for the second time in a remake of this acclaimed Tamil film featuring R. Madhavan and Vijay Sethupathi

SELFIEE
Yet another Prithviraj film gets a Hindi spin. Akshay Kumar and Emraan Hashmi star in this remake of the Malayalam comedy-drama *Driving Licence*

> **“IN MALAYALAM CINEMA, THE RISK-TAKING ABILITY IS HIGHER, SO THE ABILITY TO CREATE DISRUPTIVE STORIES IS HIGHER”**
>
> **VIKRAM MALHOTRA**
> *Founder & CEO, Abundantia Entertainment*

Instead of “remakes”, Malhotra prefers the term “adaptations”. “For me, it is less about literally remaking the film and more about reimagining its soul and sentiment,” he says. Director Jagan Shakti (of *Mission Mangal* fame), who will be directing the Hindi remake of the hit Malayalam drama *Ayyappanum Koshiyum*, concurs. “It is important to adapt to the milieu that it is set in,” he says. “The best way for me is to alter and stretch the original, but not touch the soul of the script.” Shakti, who hails from Bengaluru, feels that his ability to converse in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam puts him in an advantageous position “to approach and understand” the original better.

It also helps if the director of the original is up to redoing his work in a new language. In the case of *Vikram Vedha* and *HIT: The First Case*, producer Bhushan Kumar of T-Series thought it apt that the duo Pushkar-Gayathri and Sailesh Kolanu direct the Hindi version since “they know the characters, storyline and treatment like the back of their hand”. For Kumar, who roped in *Arjun Reddy* writer-director Sandeep Reddy Vanga for the Hindi remake, it's “not necessary for the South Indian original to have been a huge hit or for it to have had a big hero to spawn a Hindi adaptation". The story is more important.

SHAKING UP THE NORTH

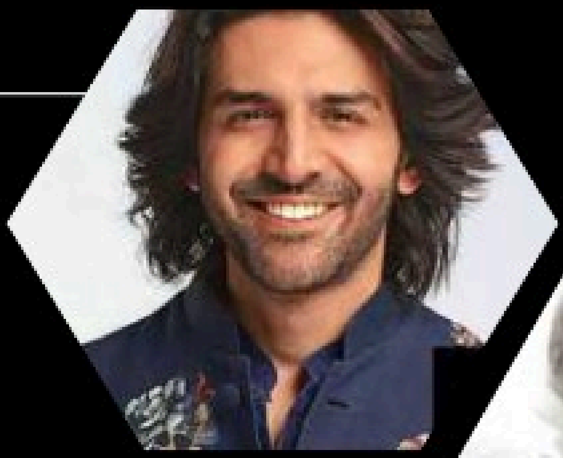
Pushpa's success in single cinemas of tier II and III centres in northern theatrical markets illustrates that films from the South are gradually eating into the theatrical share of Hindi films. "Popularity and stardom of South Indian actors is no longer just a regional phenomenon," says Rathi. "As much as Allu Arjun's films have been popular, so have the films of Mahesh Babu, Ram Charan and Jr NTR. It is only a matter of time before others too decide to release them theatrically." Or they can choose to work with them like Bhushan Kumar, who is producing two films with Prabhas—*Radhe Shyam* and *Adipurush*. Southern stars are also keen to dub the Hindi versions themselves. Ram Charan and Jr NTR have done so for *RRR*, as have Prabhas and Yash for *Radhe Shyam* and *KGF 2*, respectively.

The rising clout of south side cinema has rattled some in Mumbai. Recently, when Manish Shah announced that he would release the Hindi dubbed version of Allu Arjun's 2020 hit *Ala Vaikunthapurramuloo* in cinemas, the makers of the Hindi version panicked. Titled *Shehzada*, the remake features Kartik Aaryan and Kriti Sanon and is expected to release later this year. Shah ultimately axed his plans after *Shehzada's* producers reportedly paid him a hefty sum to do so. He will now be releasing it on his channel Dhinchaak TV on February 13. Calling Kartik "insecure", Shah says: "Actors should have the confidence to pull it off. Picture *achchhi banaate toh affect nahin hota* [If they made a good film, it wouldn't affect collections]." Meanwhile, Shah is basking in his new-found success. He hasn't got the rights to *Pushpa - Chapter 2* yet. "When they come to me for *Pushpa 2*, I expect to close at a price that is workable for all," he says. "I am not here to lose money." He can afford to dictate terms. ■

SOORARAI POTTRU
Suriya was pitch-perfect in this biopic of Air Deccan founder Captain Gorur Ramaswamy Iyengar Gopinath. Sudha Kongara Prasad, director of the Tamil drama, will helm the remake

REMADE IN HINDI

SHEHZADA
Kartik Aaryan has big shoes to fill as he features in this remake of Allu Arjun-starrer *Ala Vaikunthapurramuloo*, the Telugu hit that was one of the most watched films online during the first lockdown



MILI
Father-daughter duo Boney Kapoor and Janhvi Kapoor come together for the first time for this survival thriller based on the Malayalam film, *Helen*

ANGAMALY DIARIES
Abundantia Entertainment has acquired the rights to Lijo Jose Pellissery's vibrant Malayalam film about wayward youth, scrumptious food and crime in the Angamaly region of Kerala

AYYAPPANUM KOSHIYUM
Biju Menon and Prithviraj were splendid in this Malayalam drama about a rivalry gone too far. Arjun Kapoor and John Abraham face the tall order of replicating their thespian masterclass.

HIT: THE FIRST CASE
Another Telugu film gets a makeover. This one's an action thriller with Rajkummar Rao and Sanya Malhotra

OBITUARY: LATA MANGESHKAR (1929-2022)

United Colours of Lata

Apart from melody and octave range, Lata Mangeshkar's songs were lit by a rare emotional intelligence

By Sunil Sethi

Getting into the car with her longstanding companion, the cricketer Raj Singh Dungarpur, at Heathrow airport, Lata Mangeshkar wagged a finger at me. "Don't forget to call. Come for lunch. I'll cook for you." All I had done was help the couple locate their mislaid luggage, so the invitation was both unexpected and impossible to resist. I only had a passing acquaintance with the formidable diva—universally known as 'Didi'—during the course of reporting, but in the hurly-burly of Mumbai's studios, these encounters are ephemeral.

But here was Lata at home, relaxed, bustling about, heaping food on our plates in the traditional way. The two made a study in contrast: she, the diminutive host in her trademark bindi and plaits; he, every inch the aristocrat. When I asked how she found the desiccated coconut in London for one of the dishes, she giggled shyly; and in that enchanting girlish voice said, "*Intezaam ki baat hai* (It's just a matter of arranging for things)."

Other than her prodigious musical talent, tireless industry and phenomenal memory, "*intezaam*" was a key note of Lata Mangeshkar's life. How else would a 13-year-old, left bereft and penniless by her father (a provincial actor-singer who died at 42) have supported her mother and four siblings on a wage of Rs 60 a month? When she first switched from small acting parts (which she loathed) to playback singing, her voice was considered thin and her Urdu pronunciation, she confessed, was awful. If punishing train journeys, rehearsals and recordings—for as many as six songs a day without food, water or sleep—weren't enough hardship, a further humiliation was that playback singers went uncredited at the time.

> **From rousing patriotic anthems to playful romantic ditties, lyrics of burning passion to spiritual hymns, there was no shade of human expression Lata Mangeshkar's vast repertoire left untouched**

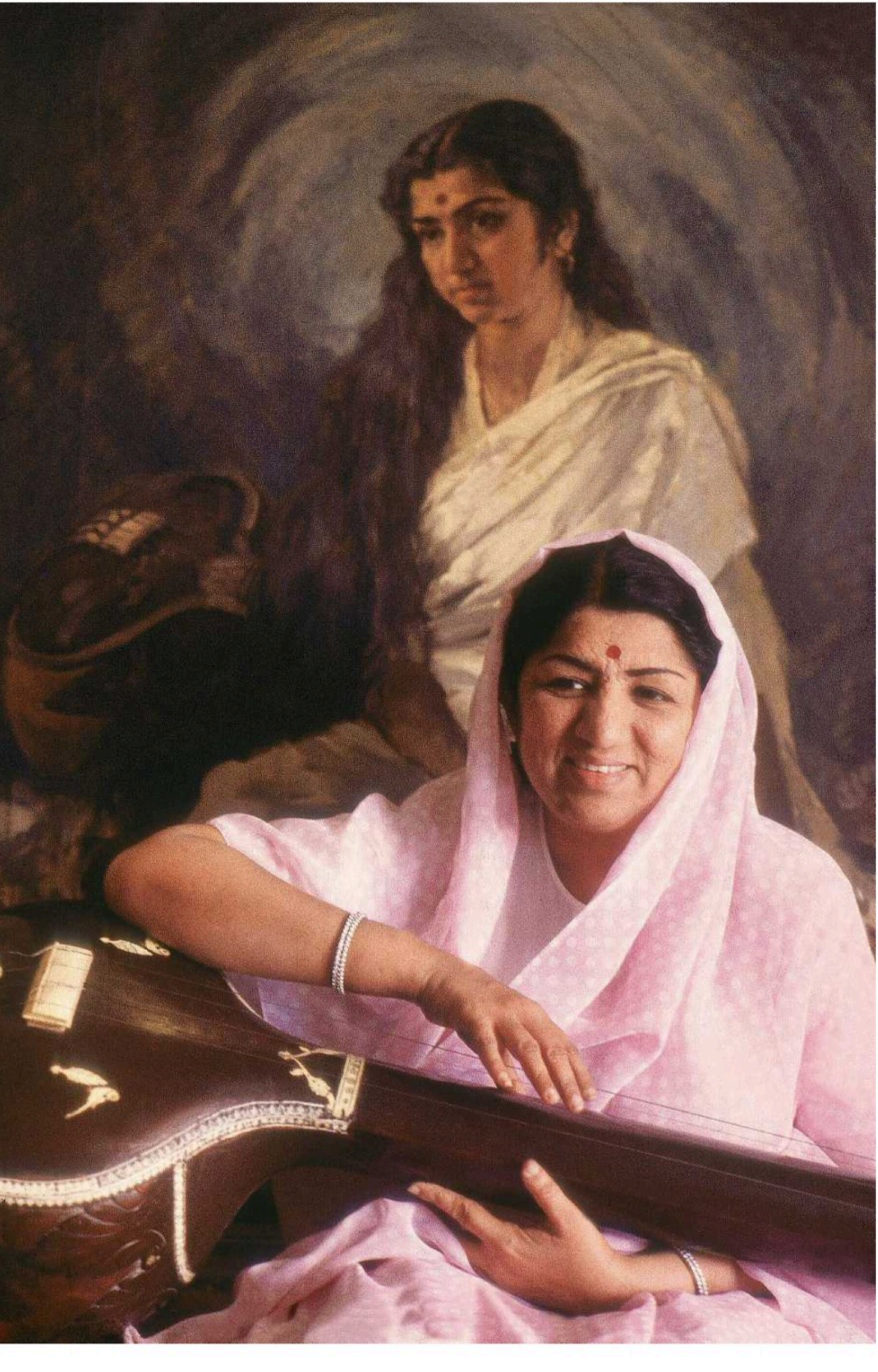
Lata Mangeshkar's life is sometimes portrayed as the ultimate feminist plot, but it is greater than the sum of its parts. Her personal struggle in the 1940s coincidentally echoed the birth of a nation. But a single song—*'Aayega Aanewala'* from the 1949 haunted house thriller *Mahal*—turned her into an overnight singing sensation. The song's exquisite prelude had been painstakingly achieved; even so, initial prints of the film and discs failed to credit her. It was only when AIR was flooded with fan mail that the singer's identity was revealed.

Chroniclers of Lata's life were awed by her powers of recall. She briskly corrected names, dates, locations and lyrics. "But that was in 1945, not 1946," she might say, highlighting an error.

Yet her melody was marked not just by a sensational memory and octave range, her songs were lit by rare emotional intelligence. Film historian Nasreen Munni Kabir, who comprehensively recorded her conversations with the maestro in *Lata Mangeshkar...in Her Own Voice* (Niyogi Books; 2009), says that if she hadn't become a singer, she would have been a psychologist. "She had an extraordinary ability to capture human feelings and the emotion behind every song. The actress Meena Kumari once said, *'Agar Lata gaa rahi hai to hamein acting karne ki kya zaroorat hai* (If Lata is singing, then we actors don't need to act)." Stars like Nargis and Madhubala only signed on films if Lata was singing for them.

From rousing patriotic anthems to playful romantic ditties, lyrics of

RAGHU RAI/INDIA TODAY



THE GOLDEN VOICE
A portrait of Lata Mangeshkar, 1981

burning passion to soaring spiritual hymns, there was no shade of human expression her vast repertoire left untouched—each piece calibrated to visual content and condensed into three minutes.

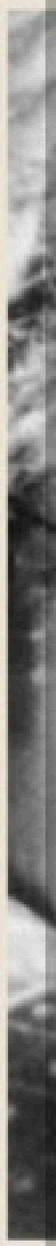
In another crucial respect, Lata enshrined the values of the modern Republic. Deeply spiritual herself, she remained wedded to India's secular ideal. So many of her close mentors and comrades—Noor Jehan, Dilip Kumar, Mohd. Rafi, Naushad Ali, Sahir Ludhianvi and Javed Akhtar, among others—were Muslim. Political leaders bent backwards to court her but she stayed aloof from politics.

Just occasionally her beliefs put her in a tight spot. When Imran Khan was building a cancer hospital in his mother's memory, he importuned her to give a charity concert to raise funds. "I will fill Lahore's biggest stadium if you come," he reportedly said. Lata was inclined to accept; she had never been to Pakistan and it would have been wonderful to see friends like Noor Jehan on home ground. When word of the proposed visit got out though, the Indian government was less than amused. It gently requested her to desist, arguing that her concert, among other concerns, would pose a security risk outside its control. Worldly professional that she was, she promptly backed off. "*Apni sarkar ke khilaaf main kaisey jaa sakti thi* (how could I go against my government's wishes)?" she later told me.

Hers was a multi-generational mandate over the hearts and minds of music lovers, so much so that no leader could dream of such a devoted constituency—one reason why politicians flocked in droves for her elaborate state funeral in Mumbai. For herself, Lata would have modestly uttered a few words of heartfelt thanks before disappearing into the wings. But in her mind, she would have admired the *intezaam*. ■

A WHITE FINCH
IN FLIGHT

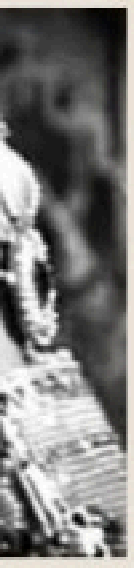
Lata Mangeshkar's voice embodied a specific feminine persona that came to fill Indian cinema



It was like lustral water, her voice. It made the body sacred... Complex feelings arise, therefore, when you see Lata Mangeshkar in the fullness of her legacy—a complexity that her own voice did not hold. For, wasn't it the very antonym of complex, of everything difficult? Yes, it was light itself...and lightness of being. A singer such as Lata does not reside merely on the music shelves, to be turned to at the end of the day, after weightier matters are accounted for. She was the ambient soundscape of a whole time in history, filling out physical space. The turntable next to the posh divan, the transistor balanced on the migrant labourer's shoulder walking back from dust-laden construction sites, the evening bustle at the small-town nukkad shop selling meetha Banarasi paan, the trucker's lonely highway, those faraway uncles with flowers behind their ears tuning into Radio Ceylon in slanted-roof houses—she was everywhere. How do you grasp the elements of such an omnipresence?

First, a truism: the early Lata was the real Lata. That was the gossamer voice that floated over a bloodied Indian landscape in 1949 as she intoned the long introduction to Khemchand Prakash's *Khamosh Hai Zamana/ Aayega Aayega*—an aural apparition that stilled the air, lulling weary minds into amnesia, inviting them into a soothing, spectral landscape, a cinematic metaverse. That's where we can see her beginning to be a formative element in the story of a nation, crucial to its identity formation. One that wiped clean the messy palimpsest of history and turned it pristine, as if with the subtle, sattvik elements proper to a purificatory rite—wispy incense smoke and sublimating camphor.

Artistes and aesthetes alike often pause on the distinction between classical and film singing. Classical vocalists, strangely, rarely manage a good film song. Could Lata have drifted in the opposite direction? Perhaps yes. In terms of the purely material aspects of vocalism, she



EMBODYING HER VOICE The young Lata (top, right) and clockwise, her early screen personas: Meena Kumari, Nutan, Nimmi and Madhubala

bore a kinship to that great genepool of artistes from the Konkan coast: Kesarbai, Mogubai, and her daughter Kishori Amonkar (who apparently could not much stand Lata's popularity). And that bit of tutelage under Ustad Aman Ali Khan, the Bhendi Bazaar gharana maestro, filled her out.

There's a 1950 video of her singing Malkauns where you see a what-if of music history: she's a white finch in flight, tracing arcs in time, borne aloft as if by air, the high notes her natural habitat, adding daubs of filigree that never disturb the raag's solemnity. No wonder Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan paid her that oft-reported compliment in mock-exasperation: "*Kambakht, kabhi besura nahin hoti.*" With her filament-like voice, she was also blessed that rare gift: perfect pitch.

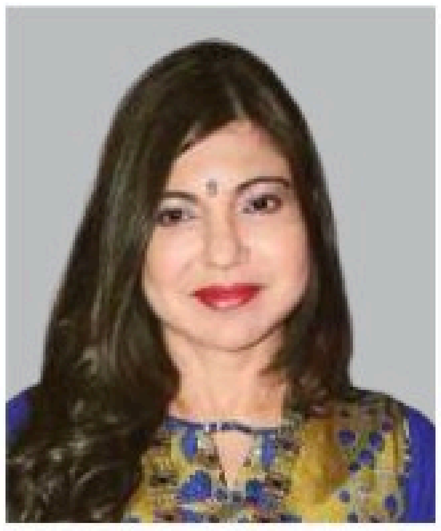
But she was fated for another path, and it's here that the perfection spills over into other domains. If Lata's was a disembodied voice that rang out across all spaces—political boundaries no bar—it was also part of a compound artefact. Fundamentally, it was a *film* song, it had lyrics, and these were lip-synced by real women in a visualised story. Thus, one of its primary functions was to body forth a *kind* of woman, a specific feminine persona that came to fill Indian cinema. What we remember as a Lata song is also a village belle pining for that itinerant stranger to whom she has lost her heart: a Nimmi in sublime pain, an ethereal Madhubala, a Meena Kumari from before time wrought lines of fatigue on her, a Nutan gambolling across open fields, a Mala Sinha wistfully watching the rain—and years later, a Suchitra Sen in spinster's white, mirroring Lata's, singing of the unfulfilled, purposeless drift of life. Her musical persona was mapped onto those women. More often than not, they were waif-like ingenues, vulnerable, caught in aspects of virginal innocence. The industry cottoned on to this fast, bringing about that division of labour with Asha, on whom it fell to emote anything that was sexually less timid. As for Lata, even her courtesans were, ultimately, pure and sacralised: witness the duet in *Mughal-e-Azam*, where the pristine Madhubala is set off against a wily rival who is given voice to by the salty Shamshad Begum.

Contrapuntal notes come in when you consider the person, of course—the Peddar Road flyover affair, her fondness for the Thackerays, the much-talked-about 'Mangeshkar monopoly'. But those are extra-musical elements. Those who say she never let anyone grow in her shadow bark up the wrong tree. Her 'victims' were not the Suman Kalyanpurs and Sulakshana Pandits: they were doppelgangers, often indistinguishable from her. It's what was radically *different* that suffered.

The thing with perfection is that it abolishes anything tainted by imperfection according to its norms, anything with angularities, anything flesh and blood. What Lata's overarching presence wrought was another kind of monopoly: a monocrop actually, one that colonised India's infinitely polyphonic universe. What evacuated the stage was the timbral richness of the thumri voice, the tawaif's song of experience, the throaty folk chanteuse, the saltiness of the earth. That wasn't her fault, that's how we liked our illusions in those days: censored, disinfected. That's the real monopoly we struggle with. So, we live with Lata.

A phoneticist friend once told me that the sounds we produce never really die, they keep bouncing around the walls of the universe forever. You could believe that of the early Lata: blemish-free, weightless, its being that of the morning dew, like the purest air had been condensed and turned into an orb of light—an adularescent pebble that, if you flung it across a lake's surface, might bounce off into infinity.

—Sunil Menon



REMEMBRANCE

THE MAGIC OF LATA*JI*

To the world, she was Lata Mangeshkar; for me, she was my inspiration, my motivation, my goddess. She has been my role model since the age of four, around the time I started listening to her on the radio and began singing myself. As a child, I thought she was a fairy who sings, until my mother told me that this beautiful voice belonged to a human being named Lata Mangeshkar. So, of course I wanted to meet her.

I was 10 years old when I fulfilled that dream. My parents had brought me to Bombay to kick off my career as a playback singer. I met her for the first time at the Film Centre in Tardeo through [composers] Kalyanji-Anandji. I remember she was recording '*Main Tujhse Milne Aayi*' (for the film *Heera*, 1973), a duet with Mohammed Rafi*ji*. I wanted to talk to her, ask her questions, but I was so awestruck that I just stood there with my mouth open and kept staring at her. There she was with her two long braids which ran all way to her feet. She smiled at my gobsmacked face, put a hand on my head and blessed me.

> **Lata Mangeshkar gave the songs she sang the beauty and form they needed. If someone were to ask me what perfection is, I would say it is Lata*ji***

She has given *ohda* (status) to playback singers and for that alone, she is bigger than anybody else. She symbolised how respected and treasured a playback singer can be. Yes, she sang beautifully-composed songs, but it was how she rendered them that made them as rich and evergreen as they are. A beautiful composition needs the correct projection and that is how it reaches the ears of the people and stays there. Lata*ji* gave the songs the beauty and form they needed. If someone were to ask me what perfection is, I would say it is Lata*ji*.

Over the years, I kept meeting her time and again and we developed a nice bond. It became a ritual to visit her house for Ganpati *darshan*. I was superstitious that if I don't go, something would go wrong. On one such visit, I complimented her scent and asked her the name of the perfume and she just handed me her Cartier bottle. I used it for a while but then the nozzle broke, so I couldn't use it. But I have the bottle still. It is an invaluable possession. I have also preserved a voice note she sent me.

Whenever I met her at her home in Peddar Road, she was very inquisitive. She wanted gossip—who is doing what, how is this person singing, why does this singer sing like that? She had a great sense of humour. With a straight face, she would crack a joke and leave you rolling with laughter. She would send me lots of songs on WhatsApp. We would exchange jokes too. She also had an elephant's memory. She even remembered the colour of the frock I wore on the day of our first meeting—green.

I last spoke to her on her birthday. She wasn't going out of the house or meeting anyone because of Covid. We had a nice, long conversation and I asked about her health. She said: "*Ek dum* fit. First class." At 91, her voice still had a childlike quality.

I have lived on her songs and as long as I live, I will be breathing in and feeding on her songs. Lata*ji ke baad koi hai hi nahin aur naa hoga* (there has never been anyone like her, nor will there ever be). Nobody can measure up to her. There's no comparison. I don't think any other actor or cricketer has had such a glorious career. She left us on the day of Saraswati Visarjan. For us, it turned out to be an actual Saraswati Visarjan. ■

Alka Yagnik *is a celebrated, award-winning playback singer*
(As told to Suhani Singh)

LEISURE

ZOMBIVLI: DEAD MEN WALKING PG 59

LOGGING INTO THE MUSEUM PG 64

SHAKESPEARE'S *MACBETH* REIMAGINED PG 62

Q&A WITH USHA UTHUP PG 66

ALI FAZAL says he was "flattered" that director Kenneth Branagh "took a chance" on him for *Death on the Nile*

FILMS

AT HOME IN THE WORLD

With yet another Hollywood project releasing in theatres, actor **Ali Fazal** is busy balancing his commitments in India and abroad

WIN FOR DIVERSITY
Ali Fazal (right) with Gal Gadot in *Death on the Nile*

Actor Ali Fazal made his overseas debut in 2015 with a tiny role in the seventh instalment of *Fast & Furious*, one of Hollywood's biggest action franchises. A lot has changed since then. With American cinema making an active push for diversity, the range of roles available to non-white actors has broadened significantly. In *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2019), it was Dev Patel who played the Dickensian protagonist. Denzel Washington plays Macbeth in Joel Coen's recent Shakespeare adaptation, and Disney has announced that a Latina actress, Rachel Zegler, will next be playing the part of Snow White.

In the upcoming adaptation of Agatha Christie's *Death on the Nile* (releasing in Indian theatres on February 11), Fazal's third international outing after period drama *Victoria & Abdul* (2017), he plays Andrew Katchadourian, a character, as the name suggests, not of Indian descent. Fazal says he was "flattered" that director Kenneth Branagh "took a chance" on him with the role, especially since it was played by the Oscar-winning actor George Kennedy in the film's 1978 version. "Our film is a perfect platform where you can have a diverse cast," says Fazal. "There's no mention of who is from where. It's a fictional world, so one can have a different gaze and [do] blind casting."

> "DEATH ON THE NILE *IS* A PERFECT PLATFORM FOR A DIVERSE CAST... IT'S A FICTIONAL WORLD, SO ONE CAN DO BLIND CASTING"

After the death of Irrfan Khan, Fazal joins a small pack of Indian actors who have started shuttling between India and abroad. "I have to be mindful of what I am choosing," he says. "It has to be the right stuff." *Death on the Nile*, an ensemble whodunit starring Gal Gadot (*Wonder Woman*, 2017), Letitia Wright (*Black Panther*, 2018), Annette Benning (*American Beauty*, 1999) and Branagh himself as detective Hercule Poirot, was an offer he couldn't refuse. To play Katchadourian, a cousin of Gadot's character, Linnet Ridgeway, and, eventually, a murder suspect, Fazal wore prosthetic teeth. "We arrived at these little hacks in order for the British dialect to come a little more naturally and a little more easily," says Fazal. "I could still be s**t. If I fail, I fail, but at least I tried."

Working with Branagh, who is also well-known for his work on stage, Fazal got an opportunity "to study acting". "He is royalty," says Fazal, referring to Branagh's training at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Fazal was also in awe of his director's humility. "Apart from the 11 key characters, there were at least 40 more actors on the ship and he knew everyone by first name. We don't see that anymore," he says of Branagh, a leading contender at this year's Oscars for another film he recently wrote and directed—*Belfast*. "He made little quizzes and chits so that the 11 of us got to know about each other's lives and careers."

What his international co-stars would, perhaps, have learned through these exchanges is that after almost a decade in front of the camera, Fazal became a household name in India thanks to his portrayal of Guddu Bhaiya in the Prime Video series *Mirzapur* (2018—). Many of Guddu's dialogues have become fodder for memes on the internet, highlighting the popularity of the crime drama. Fazal, though, took some time to come to terms with his character's appeal among the country's youth: "I couldn't watch it for a long time because to begin with, it's a very violent show and its infiltration among the younger generation bothered me." Fazal gradually realised that it was Guddu's underdog credentials which made him easy to relate to. "Everybody wants to see a story '*ki main bhi mitti se utth ke pahunch jaaoon upar*' [where even I can rise from the dirt to the top] and conquer it all," he adds. In season 2, the 35-year-old actor made it a point to ensure that Guddu doesn't swear. "Nobody missed it or noticed it," he says. "Certain things we can take responsibility for."

Last year, Fazal and his partner, actress Richa Chadha, took on another responsibility—production. Having set up Pushing Buttons Studios, the couple have announced their first feature, one in which they won't be acting. "We wanted this to be a medium where people through us could move to higher prospects," he says. "The idea that you enter a system and you get caged in it has bothered me. You don't grow, you get lost and you get cynical. It has to keep flowing."

Fazal himself, one can see, is in full flow. After finishing *Death on the Nile* promotions for the fourth time (the film was scheduled to release in 2019 but was delayed multiple times because of Covid), he resumes work on *Khufiya*, a Vishal Bhardwaj-directed Netflix spy drama with Tabu. He has also finished playing a spy, albeit one "who makes Guy Ritchie's life hell", in his next international project, *Kandahar*. Then it is time to get into the shoes of Guddu Bhaiya again. It's the equivalent of shooting three films, but it's worth all the effort. "Hidden behind all the violence, after you peel the first layer, the next one is pure emotion," he says. ■

—Suhani Singh

FILMS

DEAD MEN WALKING

The zombies in ***ADITYA SARPOTDAR'S*** *Marathi comedy,* Zombivli, *will make you laugh and introspect*

Unlike, say, Hollywood or even the South Korean entertainment industry, India's zombie cinema output has been meagre. Our various film industries' contributions to this genre have been limited—*Go Goa Gone* (2013), the Netflix shows *Ghoul* (2018) and *Betaal* (2020), a Dibakar Banerjee short for *Ghost Stories* (2020). Director Aditya Sarpotdar, a fan of Korean zombie period drama *Kingdom* (2019, Netflix), wanted to change that. "It is quite shocking that this genre hasn't seen more," he says. Sarpotdar's Marathi film *Zombivli*, recently released in theatres, fills that gap. In it, zombies descend upon Dombivli, a city in Thane, Maharashtra.

Though the zombie comedy has all the cliches we associate with the walking dead—groaning, slow movements, spooky faces—Sarpotdar and his writers also make it a point to highlight several socio-economic schisms and environmental concerns. *Zombivli* sucks you in with that trademark survival-of-the-smartest narrative, but also touches on the region's water woes. We see people's mindsets can be comparably toxic. Someone living in a swanky high-rise looks down at a neighbouring slum and holds its residents responsible for the chaos. Written during the first lockdown, the pandemic weighed heavily on the minds of *Zombivli*'s makers. "Trapped in our houses, I could see the class divide was rampant," says Sarpotdar. "There were only a handful of people who had access to information and treatment."

While *Zombivli* employs all the tropes of a zombie flick—thankfully with less blood and gore—it also rakes in a few laughs—most of them elicited by Sudhir (Amey Wagh), a character so petrified of the revived corpses, he is often clueless about how to handle the escalating crisis. In one of his initial encounters with zombies, he cries out for his mother, flashes a photo of Lord Ganesha and chants. The situation enables Sarpotdar to highlight that women can also save the day as Sudhir's pregnant wife steps up. "When everyone was panicking [during the pandemic], women were more sorted to handle things," he says.

Sarpotdar hopes his feature will inspire more filmmakers to make "local, desi zombie films". But if no one does, he has plans to turn *Zombivili* into a franchise. The ending certainly affords the possibility of a sequel. While making the case that zombie films are here to stay, he says, "A zombie is like a virus that hits us. We [now] know that this situation is much more plausible, and the idea of humans turning into bloodthirsty individuals is, of course, fascinating." ■ **—Suhani Singh**

IN *ZOMBIVLI*, ADITYA SARPOTDAR HIGHLIGHTS SEVERAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC SCHISMS

BOOKS

An Apprentice Remembers

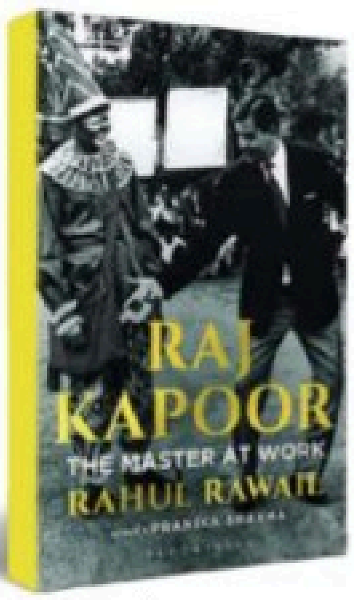
Rahul Rawail's unpretentious and intimate biography of Raj Kapoor is a treat to read

WITH A LEGEND Raj Kapoor (centre) with Rishi Kapoor (right) on the sets of *Prem Rog*

The first time Rahul Rawail—aged barely 16—saw Raj Kapoor in action on a film set, "it was like watching him conduct a symphony." This experience was followed by many others of its type. "I saw the Immortal Master weave his magic," he tells us in his book's prologue; later descriptions include "the puppeteer who deftly manipulated the strings" and "the man who was the epicentre of Indian cinema".

Rawail, a childhood friend of Rishi Kapoor, began assisting Raj Kapoor on *Mera Naam Joker*, and went on to work on *Bobby*—two films, very different in content, tone and scale, that represented a transitional period in RK's career. *Raj Kapoor: The Master at Work* has many stories about the making of these films, along with more general recollections about Raj Kapoor's working methods, quirks, and knowledge of filmmaking.

Here are anecdotes about RK as technician, editor, teacher, director of actors... and as gourmand too, a running theme being his love for food, which led him to go out of his way to catch the Deccan Queen so he could enjoy the train's distinctive meals. (The long editing sessions, we learn, began with everyone spending over an hour deciding on the vast menu for breakfast, lunch and dinner.) Here also are accounts of the "Dambara nights", where iconic scenes from RK films were screened, and of musical *addas* that involved the substitution of obscene "dummy lyrics" while putting together what eventually became gentle, timeless songs. There are analyses of scenes such as the "trilateral shot" featuring the three protagonists in the *Sangam* climax. And there are entertaining asides about the eccentricities of the actor Prem Nath (Raj Kapoor's brother-in-law), who, going by his appearances here, could well have been a solid comic figure in a fictional work.



RAJ KAPOOR
The Master at Work
Rahul Rawail (as told to Pranika Sharma)
BLOOMSBURY
₹699; 245 pages

In terms of writing and structuring, *The Master at Work* is very uneven—with more than its fair share of typos—but its strengths come from the personal, conversational tone. Biographical works are frowned upon when they treat their subjects with dewy-eyed reverence, but this book wasn't intended as an objective study—the lens (or the POV) is a very intimate one. RK Studios, where Rawail began his apprenticeship, was a shrine for the youngster who would later become a director himself—helming some notable films of that unfairly-maligned decade, the 1980s, such as *Arjun* and *Dacait*. Importantly, then, this book is partly about Rawail as well, and not just because it ends with a few chapters about his own, RK-influenced work.

Contemporary Indian film literature—the anecdotal or gossipy variety anyway—is so full of repetition, of familiar stories recycled, that it's a relief to come across a singular perspective. At one point, Rawail tells us that even today when he watches the party scene in *Bobby*, all he can see is two junior artistes gobbling up expensive *pista* and *badaam* that had been provided in rationed quantities, an incident that caused him much stress during the shoot. It's the sort of observation that you could only possibly find in *this* book, and there are many others like it. If this is what a hagiography can be like, bring on a few more. ■

—Jai Arjun Singh

THE OBITUARY IRRFAN DESERVES

ANUP SINGH'S MEMOIR OF HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH IRRFAN KHAN PROVES THAT FOR THE FILMMAKER, THE LEGENDARY ACTOR WAS BOTH COLLEAGUE AND MUSE

IRRFAN
dialogues with the wind
ANUP SINGH
Foreword by
AMITABH BACHCHAN

IRRFAN
Dialogues with the Wind
by Anup Singh
COPPER COIN
₹699; 270 pages

Filmmaker Anup Singh remembers it was 4.54 am when his wife Catherine woke him up. His phone had been buzzing repeatedly, disturbing the quiet of their French country residence. Singh recalls grabbing the phone and making his way to the garden. He had received hundreds of messages, telling him about Irrfan's passing. He was still hoping they were rumours, so he texted Irrfan's wife, Sutapa Sikdar, who confirmed the news. Dazed, Singh sat under a cherry tree.

Anup Singh and Irrfan had worked on two films together: *Qissa* (2013) and *The Song of Scorpions* (2017), and were preparing for their third collaboration when Irrfan was diagnosed with a malignant tumour. "There was so much that was left incomplete in terms of our work, our relationship," says Singh. It was almost like Singh couldn't let go of his friend, colleague and muse. He began hearing him everywhere, even in the sound of doors. "Certain images flare in your head, you remember gestures, and I did my best to not remember. It was too painful. I slowly realised there was no escape. And that, perhaps, my friend was talking to me." That's how Singh began working on *Irrfan: Dialogues with the Wind*, a memoir of Singh's working relationship with Irrfan, and a tribute to their shared art and friendship.

When asked about what separated Irrfan from his contemporaries, Singh recounts an incident from the sets of *The Song of Scorpions*. "It was an intense scene. Irrfan had to cross the desert and come close to a large dune. It was a scene of great loss and emotional danger. We were completely focused. Irrfan began doing the scene, but stopped all of a sudden." He called out to his director, and asked him to sniff something he had chanced upon. "It was deer dung!" laughs Singh. Irrfan, he says, was the rare actor who allowed himself to get distracted by elements around him, which gave his work a real-life palpability.

What would Irrfan have thought of the book? "Irrfan was improvisatory, which means he had given up on a fixed notion of image. He lost all of his self-consciousness. By the end, I got the feeling that he was telling me—'Let's work together, let's find out more about ourselves.'"

Irrfan's passing has left a giant void in the industry and in the hearts of his fans. Singh hopes his book can remind them of Irrfan's trademark lilt. "Like every artist of a certain stature, I think Irrfan demanded that we change our established ways of seeing and speaking about what we see. I think he demands that we renew our relationship with ourselves and our universe." ■

–Tatsam Mukherjee

Anup Singh's memoir of Irrfan came about after the filmmaker couldn't stop hearing and sensing the actor everywhere after his death

FRIEND AND MUSE
Anup Singh and Irrfan on the sets of *The Song of Scorpions*

CINEMA/ OTT

THERE IS ALWAYS BLOOD

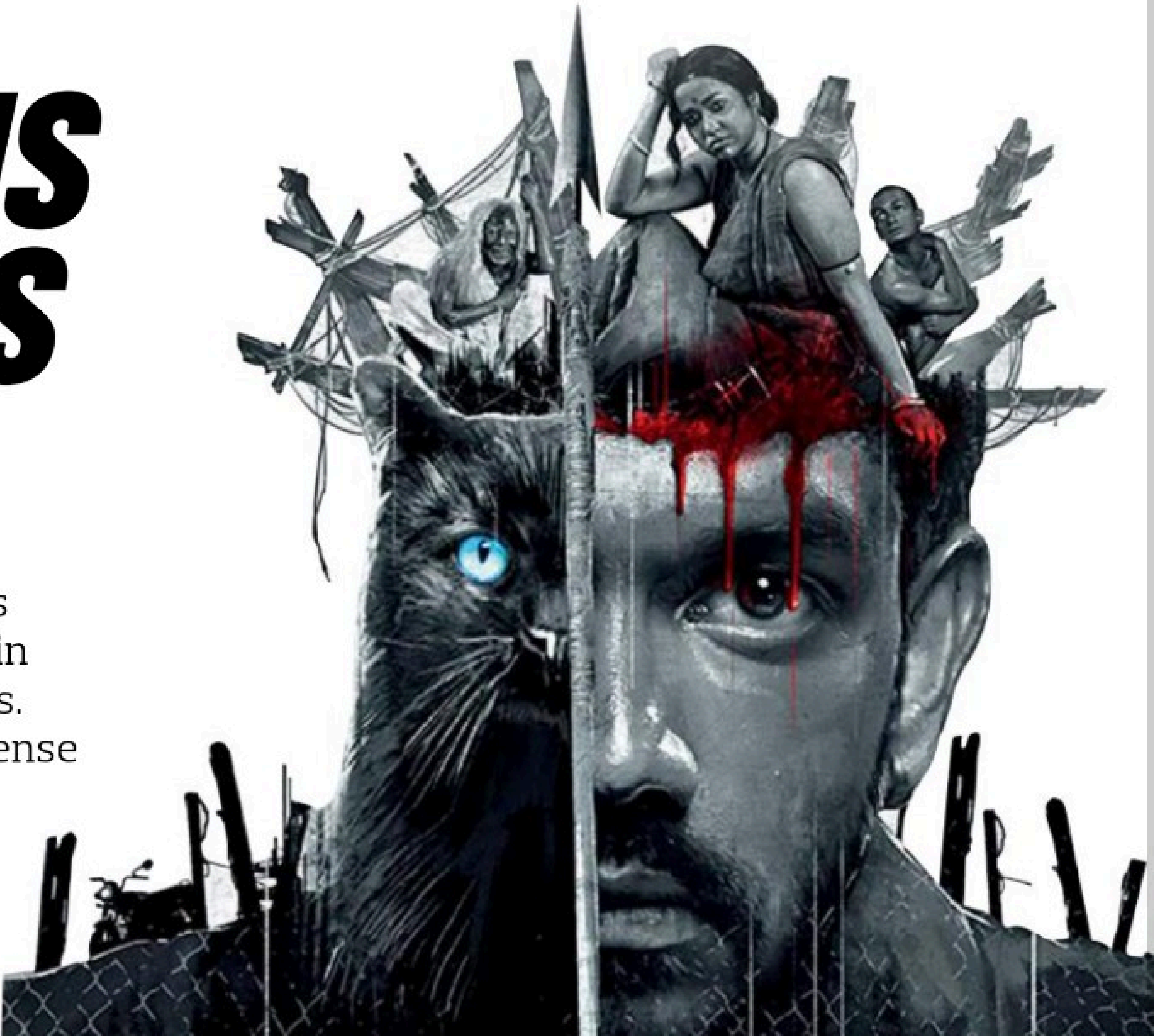
Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has been brought to the screen in many shapes and languages. Now we have a playfully intense Bengali web series and an austere American film

Everyone in the coastal village of Geilpur smells of fish, someone observes in the new Bengali series *Mandaar* (streaming on Hoichoi). “And I'm a cat. Meow!” replies a newly-arrived cop named Mukaddar, speaking in effete-sounding English. In another scene, he liberally pours ketchup over the catfish on his plate, a culinary travesty.

On the face of it, such moments don't belong in a *Macbeth* adaptation, but then those fish do appear to be “steeped in blood”, and Mukaddar (played by director Anirban Bhattacharya) is a stand-in for Shakespeare's Macduff—a much more corrupt version. *Mandaar* nicely recasts the play's characters. Mandaar/ Macbeth (Debasish Mondal) is a strongman who works for a local leader, and whose impotence is a source of frustration for his wife, the sensuous Laili (Sohini Sarkar), obsessed with having a child.

After setting things up with a striking version of the “Fair is foul and foul is fair” in the opening, this five-episode series meanders for a while but soon builds in intensity with some powerful scenes such as one where Mandaar, beset by ghostly visions, pursues Pedo, the weird, supple young boy who is one of the “witches”. Or a nightmare shot in desaturated colours, emphasising the redness of the characters' clothes while rendering much else monochrome.

More than any of Shakespeare's other works, “the Scottish Play” (as it is sometimes called for



REVIVING THE CLASSIC (from top, left) Stills from *The Tragedy of Macbeth*; *Joji*; *Mandaar*; and *Throne of Blood*

MORE THAN ANY OF SHAKESPEARE'S OTHER WORKS, *MACBETH* HAS BEEN BROUGHT TO THE SCREEN ACROSS DIFFERENT CULTURES AND MILIEUS

superstitious reasons) has been brought to the screen across different cultures and milieus. What is it about *Macbeth* that so appeals to filmmakers, from legends such as Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa and Roman Polanski to the makers of today's web series? Perhaps it's the unforgiving darkness of the story (both protagonists, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, commit crimes and descend into crippling paranoia or guilt). Or it could be the many set-pieces that make for powerful imagery, like Lady Macbeth's handwashing. Or the witches: nearly every version has found an inventive way to depict them—most amusingly perhaps in Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (2003), where two gossipy cops fill in for the prophesying crones.

Even last year's Malayalam film *Joji*, though only tenuously inspired by *Macbeth*, does witty things with some of the play's iconic moments: with the story playing out in Covid time, the instruction "Put on a mask and go there" is a practical one, but also a nod to the many mask references ("False face must hide what the false heart doth know") in the original work.

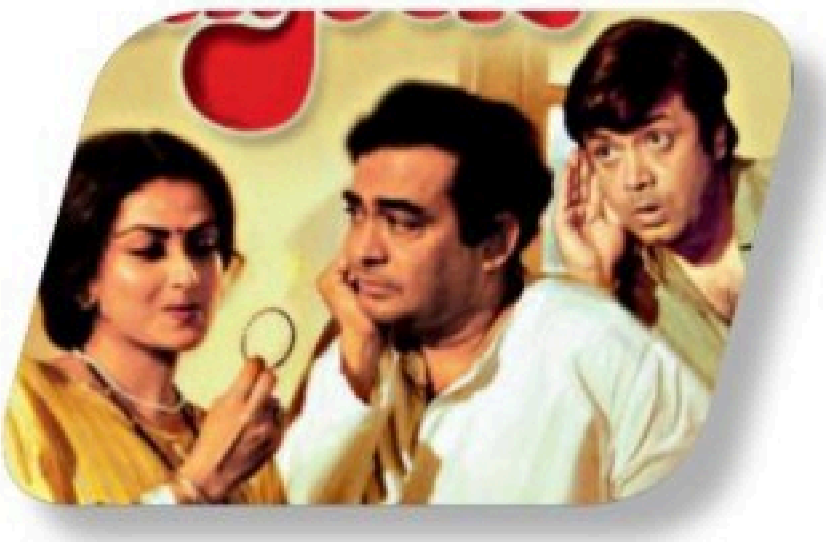
On the one hand, non-Anglophone adaptations like *Mandaar* and *Joji* provide their own spins on Shakespeare's prose and on key passages: take the use of Noh theatre elements in Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), which brings a still, eerie quality to scenes such as the appearance of Banquo's ghost. On the other hand, there are English versions that offer straightforward treatments of the verse but present familiar scenes in new ways. The latter type is currently represented by Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (Apple TV+), so stunningly shot in black-and-white that the over-used cliché 'every frame looks like a painting' really seems to apply here. An alienating, dread-filled atmosphere is created by the framing and set design, which includes giant hallways and endless corridors.

And yet, even a 'pure' *Macbeth* like this one can have off-kilter moments that take licence with Shakespeare's words. In the scene where Macbeth thinks he sees a dagger directing him towards Duncan's room, the illusory weapon is presented as a bright vertical shape on a door far away, and his physical gestures don't quite match the words of his soliloquy, which adds to the viewer's dislocation. "Come, let me clutch thee," Macbeth says to the dagger, followed by "I have thee not and yet I see thee still". The directors who have tried to bring this strange, haunting play to the screen must often have felt the same way about their elusive source material. ■

—Jai Arjun Singh

SHAKING UP SHAKESPEARE

Films that successfully adapted the Bard's work



ANGOOR (1982)

Gulzar's take on *A Comedy of Errors*—with two pairs of twins caught in an identity switch that becomes progressively manic—was one of the high points of the 1980s' Middle Cinema.

* * *

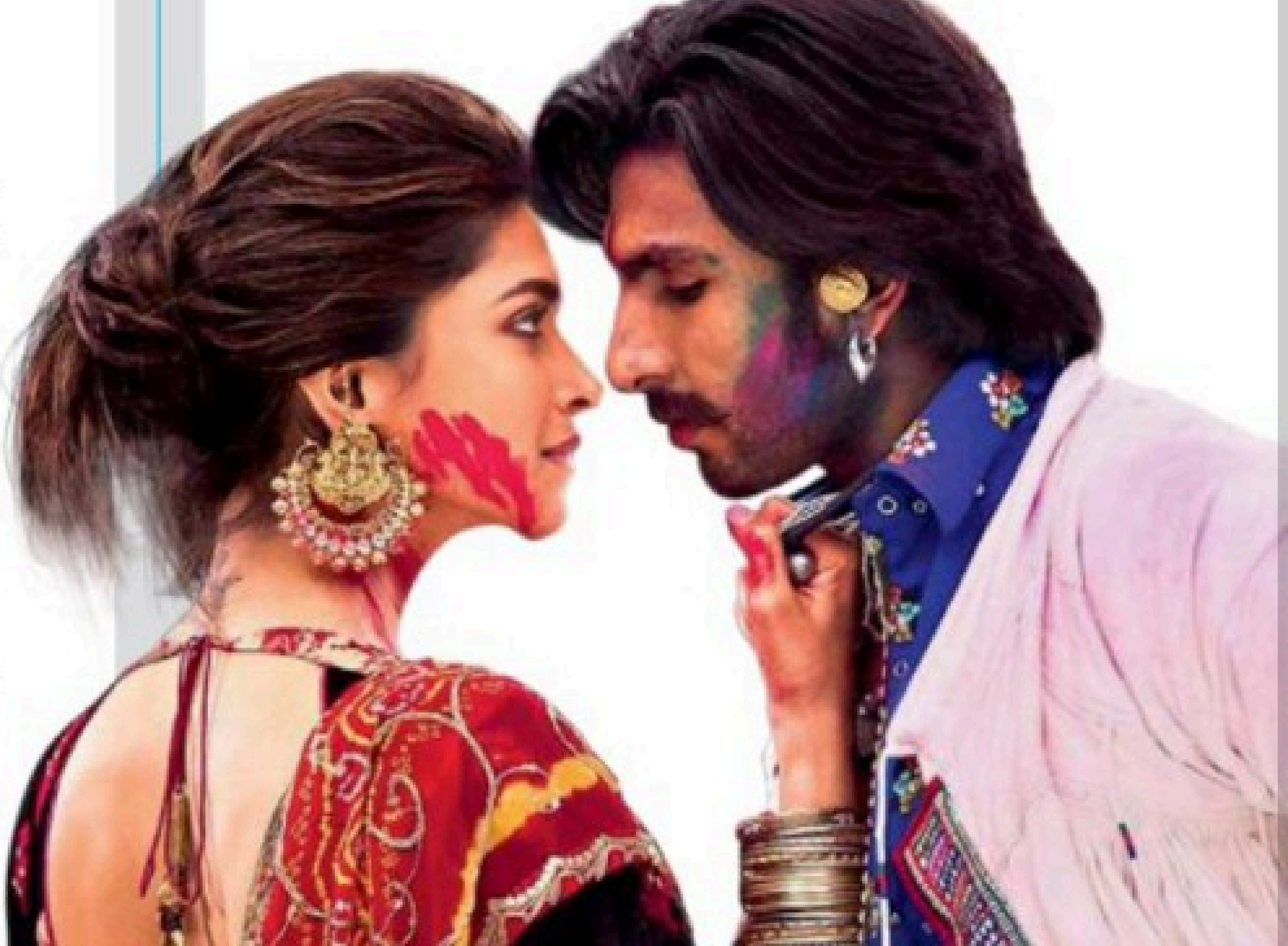
HAMLET (1996)

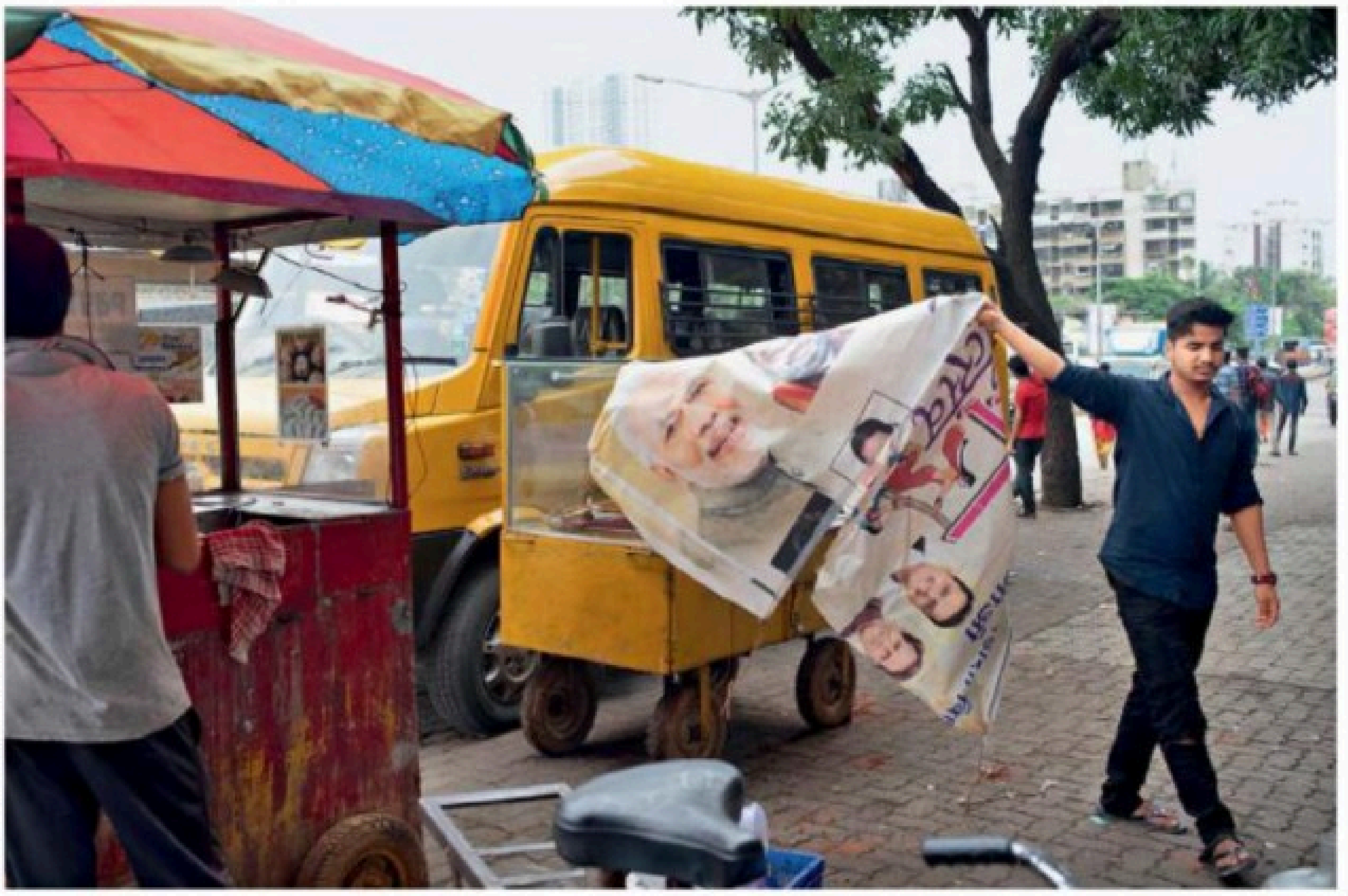
Of the many *Hamlet* films, Kenneth Branagh's may be the most daring, since it retains the full text of the play—which results in a four-hour epic. But Branagh's visual sense along with the talents of a huge cast makes it deeply rewarding.

* * *

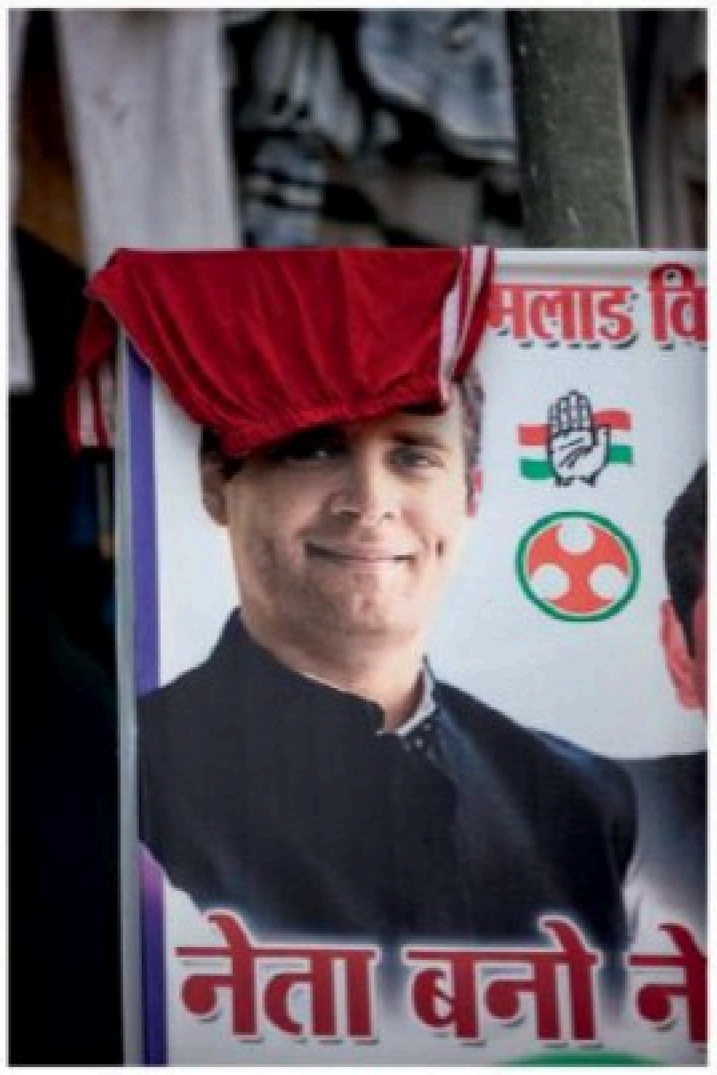
GOLIYON KI RAASLEELA RAM-LEELA (2013)

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's brand of filmmaking isn't to all tastes, but this opulent, darkly poetic reimagining of *Romeo and Juliet* is one of our best mainstream Shakespeare films, with two lovers who seem as passionate about guns as about each other.





RITESH UTTAMCHANDANI



PHOTOGRAPHY

Poster Boys

In his debut show, photographer **Ritesh Uttamchandani** *trains his lens on the whimsical afterlife of political billboards*

SIGNS OF THE TIMES
Photographs from Ritesh Uttamchandani's *A Lease of Life* exhibition

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ART

LOGGING INTO THE MUSEUM

BY HELPING KERALA MUSEUM DIGITISE OVER 200 ARTWORKS, GOOGLE ARTS & CULTURE HAS FURTHERED A REVOLUTION

With the pandemic having made access to physical spaces difficult, virtual, interactive exhibitions have proven to be a boon for art enthusiasts the world over. In Kochi, for instance, Kerala Museum's partnership with Google Arts & Culture recently made available over 200 artworks for online viewing. The use of Gigapixel technology—a photo-capturing process that allows images to be seen in their highest possible resolution—will help viewers explore the museum's paintings in extraordinary detail.

The objectives of Google Arts & Culture are simple—to make more culture available to more people through technology and partnerships; to share collections and knowledge found both in museums and in everyday life. "Curators appreciate the ability to guide audiences through the masterpieces of their collections using the deep zoom features that Google Art Camera technology enables. By integrating these high-resolution images with virtual tours, video, audio, maps and viewing notes, curators can present compelling stories online", says Simon Rein, senior program manager, Google Arts & Culture.

Speaking about Kerala Museum's collection, its director Aditi Nayar says, "In 1984, R. Madhavan Nayar, an entrepreneur from Kerala, initiated the museum in Cochin. He collected 230 paintings and sculptures by iconic artists such as M.F. Husain, Jamini Roy, Ramkinkar Baij and K.G. Subramanyan, with the intent to build a comprehensive resource on modern Indian art, accessible to students and the public." It was this vision that became a

GOING VIRTUAL
The digitisation process of Kerala Museum's art collection

What would Indian urban life be like without posters of political leaders staring at pedestrians? More importantly, ever wondered what happens to these banners made of vinyl sheets once they have outlived their purpose of inflating "the egos of neighbourhood apparatchiks during functions and festivals"? Curated by Ranjit Hoskote, Ritesh Uttamchandani's debut show *A Lease of Life* (on view at the Cymroza Art Gallery, Mumbai, until February 28) tracks these posters down to the most unexpected settings where they are repurposed rather imaginatively—as body covers for auto-rickshaws, awnings for roadside stalls and mats for vegetable vendors.

Hoskote's favourite image is that of a boy sitting at a roadside stall with a political poster forming part of the display surface. "For a brief moment," Hoskote says, "the loud rhetoric of leadership becomes incidental, while the hopes and dreams of the child fill us with anticipation of a better, more just and inclusive future." Hopes and dreams aside, many serve as a sly ode to Mumbaikars' legendary survival instinct, or *jugaad*. One amusing photograph features a pair of shorts drying over Rahul Gandhi's head, another shows a local politician's smiling visage emerging from under a mound of *chappals*.

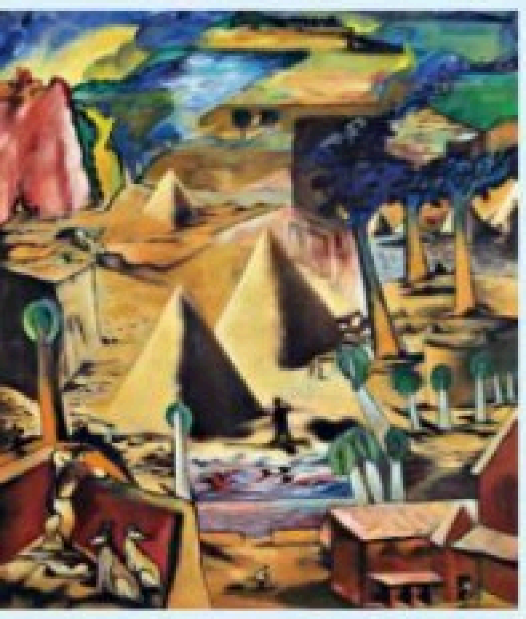
RITESH UTTAMCHANDANI'S DEBUT SHOW REVEALS HOW POLITICAL POSTERS ARE REPURPOSED IMAGINATIVELY

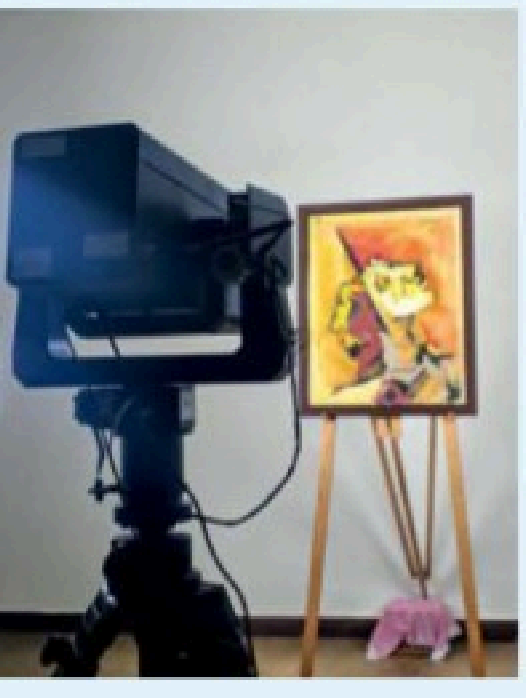
You might find beneath the black comedy a subtle commentary on rampant urbanisation, cultural bricolage, red tape, labour migration, public engagement with civic spaces, architecture and infrastructure. "To me, the seeming whimsicality of the manner in which these posters are recycled by their new users, their secondary and tertiary users, if you will, offers us a distinctive way of reading political reality—the passing and fall of power and influence in time, the transience of authority and the arrogance of rulers," says Hoskote.

On a visit to one of the places where these political posters are manufactured, Uttamchandani realised that they had templates, just like everything else in the so-called 'City of Dreams'. "In Mumbai, there's a consistent murder of original thought at several levels," he says. A former photojournalist, Uttamchandani is drawn to what he calls an "alternative way of seeing the world". He seems adept at making striking images out of things that often go unnoticed. The years spent in journalism taught him many things, including his work ethic and how to shoot on the go. "There came a time when I started getting fatigued by not just what I saw around me but by my own work. Newsrooms can be very welcoming towards conventional approaches but not so much towards tangential thoughts," says Uttamchandani, who quit his job at *Open* magazine in 2015. Three years later, he self-published a fable-esque photo-book titled *The Red Cat and Other Stories*. Excerpts from it are seamlessly embedded into *A Lease of Life*, helping provide context to Uttamchandani's work, which seems to borrow equally from photographer Peter Bialobrzeski's urban realism and Hrishikesh Mukherjee's cinema.

Hoskote, who has followed the photographer's work for close to a decade, first saw *The Red Cat...* on his laptop and instantly knew that "[Ritesh's] imagination was attuned to matters of literary and artistic form, apart from being engaged with documentarian preoccupations". Hoskote promises that *A Lease of Life* is the first in a cycle of exhibitions that he is curating for the Cymroza Art Gallery that will "address photographic practice and the complexities of the everyday". ■

–Shaikh Ayaz





"By integrating high-resolution images with virtual tours, video, audio, maps and viewing notes, curators can present compelling stories online"

SIMON REIN
Senior Program Manager, Google Arts & Culture

"Google Arts & Culture shared the project's vision of access and excellence. Their team guided and supported our curators and editors at every stage"

ADITI NAYAR
Director, Kerala Museum

guiding principle when selecting artworks for digitisation. Showcasing both highlights and hidden gems, the digitised collection helps tell the story of Indian artists and of artist collectives against the backdrop of the nation's historical and cultural atmosphere.

Interesting insights become evident when one visits the website (artsandculture.google.com/partner/kerala-museum). For starters, viewers can easily comprehend the legacies of modernists such as Subramanyan and Madhava Menon. They can also see the long relations and patterns of influence that connect the Kerala, Shantiniketan and Baroda schools of art. "Google Arts & Culture shared the project's vision of access and excellence. Their team guided and supported our curators and editors at every stage of the project," says Nayar. And Google, for its part, is committed to expanding its net by adding yet more collections online. "Since the start of Google Arts & Culture in 2011, more than 2,000 cultural institutions from 88 countries have shared their collections in thousands of immersive exhibitions," says Rein. ■

–Rahul Kumar

“I am 100% Original”

Usha Uthup’s authorised biography *The Queen of Indian Pop* demystifies the powerful voice that transcended genres and languages. It also reminds us why the 74-year-old singer remains a legend

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

Q. How do you look back at your 53-year-long career as a playback singer?
I have had a dream journey. Some of my career’s highlights have also been the challenges. For instance, the fact that I was a live performer before I became a playback singer. I come from a time and age when there was only print media and word-of-mouth. So even though people had heard of me, recognition was slow. Then, another challenge was my deep voice, which was so different from others’ in the industry. It did limit me from getting more offers in films, but it also slowly turned into a highlight: I am 100 per cent original.

Q. Your biography chronicles your remarkable journey to being regarded as the “queen of pop”. What does that phrase signify to you?
It’s a bit embarrassing to be called the “queen of pop”, although I feel very thrilled to be known as that. Thank god I didn’t write an autobiography because I would have never called myself that. I’ve always believed music is not my business, communication is, and the title makes me feel responsible as a singer to communicate the right signals to people.

Q. You sing in 17 Indian and eight foreign languages. What does it take to master the craft of playback singing in languages not your own?
I work very hard at my languages. I don’t just take the trouble to find out the nuances of the specific languages but I also write my lyrics. I make at least three drafts of a song because I feel when you write something out, you remember it better. I also have my own code of how to pronounce certain words.

Q. At this point in your career, what makes you say yes to a project?
Getting a great audience. I don’t mean numbers, but just the quality and engagement. And, of course, I would like to be offered good money, too.

–with Poulomi Das